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Ravel's *Miroirs*: Text and Context

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Research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music.

Johannesburg, February, 2007

Abstract

This research report examines Maurice Ravel's piano pieces, *Miroirs* (1905), as texts. These five piano pieces draw on a wide range of sources and conventions across nearly two centuries and yet are utterly integrated in their expression. In the *Miroirs,* Ravel exhibits a fascinating meshing of historical and contemporary influences that range from Mozart to Chabrier and Fauré. The pieces are also interestingly and very personally related to their cultural and social contexts, in that each individual piece was dedicated to a member of the *Apaches*, a group of young artists and intellectuals residing in Paris of whom Ravel was himself one. The research examines the significance of the *Miroirs* both within Ravel's own and the broader twentieth-century piano repertoire.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Music in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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12 Day of February 2007.

Preface and Acknowledgements

Maurice Ravel is an intriguing composer; sometimes categorised as an Impressionist, sometimes a Neo-classicist and perhaps more often uncategorised. Although his older contemporary, Claude Debussy, is generally assessed as more important to the development of twentieth-century music and certainly the leader of French music at the turn of the century, Ravel nevertheless made a unique contribution. He himself claimed that he, rather than Debussy, should be given credit for initiating in *Jeux d'eau* a new kind of piano writing subsequently labelled as Impressionism (Larner 1996: 91). The *Miroirs* are a further advancement. These pieces are not very well known with the exception of the 'Alborada del gracioso', which remains the most popular with pianists. The works are captivating: they are Lisztian in their technical make-up yet more complex in their harmonic vocabulary and thus provide an unusual modernist expression of virtuosity.

These works are increasingly appealing to me as a pianist and as I began to learn them for my own performances I became more interested in their construction, from their influences, context and setting to their internal design and bravura presentation. The research divulges the background and reveals the environment in which the work was composed. I also set about exploring the score through analysis in order to gain a better understanding of Ravel's musical language. This has given me a great insight to the works and has made them more accessible to me. This report thus serves to do the same for anyone with an interest in the *Miroirs*.

This has been an informative journey, which would not have been possible without my supervisor to whom I am truly indebted, Professor Mary Rörich. I would also like to thank the staff of the Wits School of Music, who have over numerous and enjoyable years all influenced the musician I have become. Finally, a most sincere word of thanks to my piano tutors Malcolm Nay and Pauline Nossel for their continual support and encouragement in every aspect of my musical development.

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Introduction

Ravelian scholar Roger Nichols observes that ‘Ravel is a far more baffling, problematic and “deep” composer than he has so far been given credit for’ (Nichols in Mawer 2000: 250). I have undertaken to research Ravel and his *Miroirs* in an attempt to show that his stature and influence are in fact greater than is usually accorded in the generalised history of music. In order to do this I have divided this report into two parts; context and text. In the first part I have researched Ravel’s background through biographies, generalised history books, journals, music dictionaries and other academic publications. This section contains three chapters.

The first chapter places Ravel in his own time. It contextualises the composer through his surroundings, culture, society, and the era in which he lived. There is information on Ravel’s life starting with his musical education and other important childhood experiences. The course of Ravel’s academic career is well documented and shows interesting elements of his personality. His social life is also of great importance as members of his inner circle are directly related to the *Miroirs*. This chapter encompasses the environment in which Ravel lived in order to gain an understanding of the backdrop to the work of the composer.

When one studies the piano music of Ravel one discovers that it draws on a range of styles and conventions that span almost two centuries. Any examination of these sources aid the understanding of Ravel’s own accumulated influence. Ravel’s piano compositions are a culmination of a development and progression in keyboard music that began in the eighteenth century. In Chapter 2 I trace that line through various important composers whose piano works affected Ravel and his compositional style. It is interesting to see the composers with whom Ravel felt an affinity. He spent much time studying the works of other composers and through their influence his own aesthetic was formed. This chapter offers an understanding of the complexity of his aesthetic and demonstrates how it is part of the evolution of piano music in the early twentieth century.

The final chapter of Part One deals with the reception of Ravel's music both in his own time and subsequently. Ravel was received with mixed reactions as his works were performed at different venues in Paris. Some of the negative reception led Ravel and his colleagues to form a society whose purpose was to perpetuate the performance of new works by contemporary composers. It is always difficult to bring new music to the fore and this chapter reveals how it was with Ravel's music, even offering some reviews of the *Miroirs'* first performances. The early recordings are also noted and the importance, not only of the *Miroirs,* but also of Ravel today is evaluated.

The second part of the report is divided into five sections, one for each of the pieces that make up the *Miroirs*. Each is described and discussed in general terms. The brief analyses that follow aim at making these difficult works more accessible to the pianist and listener. The works are discussed in terms of form and structure as well as rhythmic, melodic and harmonic interest. Connections are made to the contextual part of the report to create a complete understanding of the *Miroirs*.

PART ONE

1. Ravel's life: A Context[1]

Maurice Ravel was born in 1875 in Cibourne in the Basque country, the birth town of his mother, Marie Delouart. His father, Pierre-Joseph Ravel, was of Swiss origin but the family moved to Paris when Ravel was three months old. Ravel's life from then on was always centred in and around Paris although the Spanish influence from his mother's side stayed strongly with him, as did his deep and intimate relationship with his mother. His relationship with his father was also very strong. It is interesting to note that the Ravel family kept close bonds with each other throughout their lives (Nichols 1977: 2).

Ravel was born twenty-five years before the turn of the century into exciting and turbulent times. In fact his entire life was accompanied by change and unsettlement, politically, socially and artistically. The one constant was his geographical location. He never left Paris for any length of time.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, some of the most important technological advances of twentieth-century life were being made. Inventions such as Thomas Edison's light bulb, Alexander Bell's telephone, Marconi's wireless and the first automobiles heralded an age that was to be marked by scientific discovery. Just as revolutionary and influential was Freud's exploration of the unconscious mind. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the first aircraft, the discovery of vitamins, the work of Planck and Einstein's theory of relativity - a few pages of mathematical symbols that revolutionised man's view of the universe (Orenstein 1968: 1).

Ravel's own father, Pierre-Joseph, was an engineer. He left Switzerland for France in the 1850s and in 1868 patented his invention, a steam generator

[1] The biographical information for this chapter is taken from many books referenced at the end of the report but is mainly supplied by Larner's *Maurice Ravel*, Nichols' *Ravel* and Roland-Manuel's *Maurice Ravel*.

heated by mineral oils and applicable to locomotion on ordinary roads (Larner 1996: 15). This was an early predecessor to the automobile. In 1873 he travelled to Spain to work on the extension of the railway from Madrid to Irún and it was here that he met Ravel's mother, Marie Delouart.

During the nineteenth century European history was constructed on fragile political alliances and conflicting colonial interests. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 – 1871 reflected increasing tensions between France and Prussia. Bismarck, the head of the Prussian army, represented Prussia's expansionist ambitions, ambitions that were to take root and grow throughout the first half of the twentieth century. He tricked France into declaring war when she was entirely unprepared, while the German army was strong and ready for conflict. The result was a humiliating defeat after which France declared itself a republic; the Third Republic lasted until 1940 (Ward 1909: 490-505).

The inauguration of the Third Republic signified a national rebirth and the celebration of French culture across a range of institutions and disciplines. Paris became the hub of an epoch characterised by experimentation, colour and individualism. The German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche observed that the Franco-Prussian war 'unleashed France's creative spirit' (Orenstein 1968: 2). Music too was revolutionised, its language changing more dramatically than at any time since the Baroque era (Stuckenschmidt 1969: xiii). French literature, art and music finally overtook the hegemony that nineteenth-century Germany had held over these arts. Paris, at the centre, became home to many musicians, writers, poets and painters who socialised in its cafés, sharing ideas and artistic views. Even those not of French nationality came to Paris and adopted the French culture and way of life (Orenstein 1968: 2).

In 1887, at the age of twelve, Ravel began lessons in harmony, counterpoint and composition with Charles-René whose belief in using students' own compositions as a means to study theory helped Ravel find his vocation (Larner 1996: 27-28). The following year the young Ravel was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire in the piano class of Anthiome. That year he also met the young Spanish boy Ricardo Viñes who became a lifelong friend and who later gave the first performances of many of the composer's works. The boys shared an intense

interest in music, literature, poetry, art, intellectual thought and culture. In 1889, when they were only fourteen years old, the *Exposition Universelle* (World Exhibition) was held in Paris to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution. To mark this occasion French engineer Gustave Eiffel was asked to design a tower to be erected on the exposition grounds at *Champs de Mars.* The Eiffel tower, made from 7500 tons of metal and standing a thousand feet into the sky, has made the Paris skyline one of the most famous and recognisable in the world today (Curtius 1971: 270).

Despite (or perhaps because of) their youth, Ravel and Viñes were exuberantly intrigued by what they discovered at the Exhibition. Ravel was particularly taken with the Chinese shops, the Javanese theatre and its orchestra, the *gamelans.*[2] Their scales and modes, exotic melodies, ostinato textures and repetitive rhythms had such an influence on the young composer, that in an interview over forty years later, Ravel stated: 'I consider Javanese music the most sophisticated music of the Far East, and I frequently derive themes from it: 'Laideronnette' from *Ma Mère l'Oye*, with the tolling of its temple bells, was derived from Java both harmonically and melodically' (Orledge in Mawer 2000: 29).

It was here too that Ravel got his first taste of the music of the Russian 'Five'. Listening to Rimsky-Korsakov conducting his *Capriccio espagnol* influenced Ravel's orchestration a great deal. Although he was unaware of it, Ravel was surrounded by the French composers Emmanuel Chabrier, Claude Debussy and Erik Satie who were attending the Exhibition, and who were also hugely impressed by what they saw and heard (Roland-Manuel 1947: 19).

After two years at the conservatoire, Ravel won a medal and advanced to join Viñes in Charles de Bériot's senior class. He also began a harmony class with Charles Pessard. Ravel seemed not to have been the most obliging student: he was not very popular with his early teachers at the Conservatoire. After failing to win a prize for three consecutive years of examinations in the harmony class, he

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[2] An Indonesian orchestra that includes many bronze gongs, chimes and xylophones (Kamien 1996: 552).

was forced to leave. A year later in 1895 he was forced out of the piano class for much the same reason and took a three-year break from the Conservatoire (Orenstein 1968: 14-15). This was a period of reflection on his own music which he had unhurriedly but continuously worked on throughout his time at the Conservatoire. He completed some of his early piano works and took to setting poems of his favourite French poets such as Verlaine and Mallarmé to music. During this time he remained close to Viñes: they went to concerts together, discovered new music like that of Satie and revelled in older music like that of Mozart - who remained one of Ravel's most revered composers (Nichols 1977: 6).

During the last years of the nineteenth century, a series of political crises infiltrated French government and society, making an impact on every French citizen. The most talked about of these was 'The Dreyfuss Affair'. Alfred Dreyfuss, an officer in the French army, was at the heart of a racial and political fiasco that separated Frenchmen and eventually led to the separation of the Church and the State (Orenstein 1968: 2). Dreyfuss was a member of a rich Jewish family and the victim of a conspiracy when in 1894 he was accused of selling military secrets to the German government. The case was dogged by corruption and prejudice: Dreyfuss was originally convicted but in 1906 his name was eventually cleared of all charges (Curtius 1971: 148).

During Ravel's absence from the Paris Conservatoire some changes had occurred. The director Ambroise Thomas had died and was succeeded by Théodore Dubois who became embroiled in Conservatoire politics and had eventually to resign during the *'affaire Ravel'* of 1905. [3] The appointment of Dubois prompted the resignation of the distinguished composer Jules Massenet who felt he deserved the directorship. This in turn left a vacancy for a composition instructor, which was filled by Gabriel Fauré, whom Ravel regarded as the most inspired of the older generation of French composers. Thus, when Ravel returned to the Conservatoire in 1898, he began lessons in counterpoint

[3] See page 9.

and orchestration with André Gedalgé and later joined Fauré's composition class (Larner 1996: 49-50).

Ravel began to concentrate intensively on a compositional career. After Viňes performed the solo piano work, *Menuet antique,* Chabrier's publisher, Enoch, published it. Fauré began to introduce his pupil to influential members of society, some of who would later become part of Ravel's own intellectual circle. Ravel continued to have works performed and found great popularity for the *Pavane pour une Infante défunte* (Larner 1996: 54-60).

Although Ravel had matured as a composer, his academic record remained unimpressive – a fact which he began to deeply resent. By the end of 1900 Ravel had again failed to win a prize in composition for two consecutive years and was required to leave. He was also eliminated in the first round of the prestigious Prix de Rome composition competition. This competition was held each summer at the Conservatoire and consisted of two rounds. In the preliminary examination candidates were required to compose a four-part fugue and a short piece for choir and orchestra on a set text. In the final round candidates were isolated and provided with food outside their door for approximately a month while they created a forty-minute texted cantata for three to four soloists, with orchestra. The prize was a fully sponsored year in Rome and ensured its recipients several years of financial security (Nichols 1977: 28). Already Ravel suspected that his works were disregarded purely because he was the composer of *Schéhérazade* which was far too progressive for Dubois' taste. The following year Ravel returned to Fauré's class as an observer and entered the Prix de Rome for the second time. He was awarded the third prize. Ravel re-entered the competition in 1902 and 1903 and while he reached the final round on both occasions, he failed to win. He wisely refrained from entering in 1904, but the following year was his last chance before exceeding the age limit of thirty. He was disqualified after the preliminary round as the jury found his fugue too unconventional. The press erupted with indignation; Jean Marnold, the critic of the *Mercure de France,* questioned whether the prize would continue to be 'wrested away by intrigue or awarded by idiots' (Roland-Manuel 1947: 39). The whole *affaire* became a huge embarrassment for the Conservatoire. Dubois resigned, leaving Fauré to take his place.

The *affaire Ravel* was not the only time the press took an interest in the composer and it was certainly not the only time that Ravel was involved in a press debate. Ravel and Debussy were pitted against one another many times during their lives and this rivalry frequently found its way into the newspapers. Ravel was an ardent fan of the older composer and Debussy showed a genuine interest in the work of the younger man. Their relationship was never close, however, and each must certainly have felt moments of professional jealousy at their respective successes. The relationship first began to take strain when Ravel took sides with and financially supported Rosalie Texier, Debussy's first wife, after he left her for Emma Bardac. The breaking point came when the critic Pierre Lalo insinuated that Ravel's music, in particular the *Miroirs*, was copied from Debussy's style of piano writing. Ravel was infuriated and wrote a letter to Lalo insisting that he had, in *Jeux d'eau,* created a new style of piano writing and that Debussy's piano work *Pour le piano* which pre-dated *Jeux d'eau* 'from a purely pianistic view had nothing new in it' (Larner 1996: 91). Lalo printed this personal letter in *Le Temps,* creating a rift between the composers that could not be healed.

This new type of piano writing came to be known as Impressionism, taking its name from the artistic movement prevalent in Paris at this time. The first Impressionist work in music was Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (after Mallarmé). *Faune* was completed in 1895, twenty-one years after the creation of the first Impressionist painting. By the time Debussy was writing the *Préludes* (1910 and 1913), which are essentially Impressionist piano works, the style had gone out of fashion in the art world. Both Ravel and Debussy were well acquainted with artists and writers who inspired them to bring a new movement to their medium (Palmer 1973: 17-19). Impressionistic music is filled with the spirit of the artistic movement: a spirit of freedom, naturalness, spontaneity and uninhibitedness (Kamien 1996: 453). Debussy once remarked: 'My desire is to reproduce what I hear, a subject where action is sacrificed to feeling' (Palmer 1973: 19). Although Ravel claimed priority to this kind of writing with *Jeux d'eau* (1901), it is still generally accepted that Debussy dominated the music scene from the turn of the century until his death at the end of the First World War in 1918, after which Ravel was internationally regarded as France's leading composer (Orenstein 1968: 4).

The term Impressionism was only given to music in the twentieth century, although it had existed in art for almost two decades. In 1874, Monet, Renoir and other French painters put on an exhibition in Paris. One of Monet's paintings was entitled ' Impression: Sunrise' and depicted a somewhat blurred vision of some boats on a misty ocean at dawn. An art critic who disliked the collection of tiny coloured patches mockingly called the show an 'exhibition of the impressionists' (Kamien 1996: 449). These Impressionist painters looked to the outdoors for inspiration; their works reflected light, waves, clouds, flowers, water and the beauty of the French countryside. They were less interested in the density and solidity of the world around them and investigated the effect of light on their subjects. They were informed by sophisticated colour theory and optical illusion because their interest lay in the movement of surfaces and in colour. They gave more importance to colour, light and air than to volume or definition of shape (Palmer 1973: 15). Together the artists exhibited their paintings, socialised in cafés, attended the theatre and enjoyed the carefree life-style that Paris had to offer. There was a large group of Impressionist painters and the most famous of these were: Manet, Degas, Monet, Boudin, Renoir, Pissaro, Cézanne and Gauguin.

Stéphane Mallarmé came to be known as the 'Impressionist' poet but he was in fact a Symbolist. The Symbolists, led by Leconte de Lisle, emerged as a reaction against the Parnassian school.[4] They aimed at freeing verse from strict forms to achieve fluidity and concentrated on the musical qualities and sonorous sounds of poetry (Orenstein 1968: 3). Mallarmé believed that 'all art constantly aspires to the condition of music' (Palmer 1973: 17). Thus the Symbolists rebelled against the old conventions and turned poetry into an intermingling of all sense-impressions. Mallarmé's professed aims were 'vagueness and imprecision', and his fields of exploration, 'the fantasy and the dream' (Palmer 1973: 17).

The work of the Symbolist poets directly inspired many composers and works of the day: most famously, Debussy's orchestral work *L'Après-midi d'un faune,* a musical evocation of Mallarmé's poem of the same name. Debussy also made

[4] A school of French conservative poetry.

settings of Verlaine's poems. Ravel used texts from Mallarmé in the *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, Verlaine in *Un grand sommeil noir* and *Sur l'herbe*, Fargue in *Rêves*, de Régnier in *Les grands vents venus d'outremer*, de Lisle in *Chanson du rouet*: the list is almost endless (Nichols 1977: 174-175). He also used lines of poems as inspiration for instrumental works. On the title page of *Jeux d'eau* Ravel included the line 'Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille (river god laughing at the water that tickles him)' (Larner 1996: 68). This line comes from Henri de Régnier's *Fête d'eau* and is inscribed on the work in the author's own handwriting. It is clear in this specific example that this line of verse serves as a programmatic image for Ravel's spiralling fountain (Sadie 2001: 864-874).

This world of Impressionists and Symbolists was Ravel's Paris where artists, composers, authors, poets and musicians could meet and spend mutually beneficial time with each other. Ravel also belonged to an intellectual club of 'artists' with whom he shared his time and intellectual interests. The group was known as 'Les Apaches'. The name, ironically, like the term Impressionism, was initially given as a derogatory description of its members. The group started around 1902 when Paul Sordes, a painter and music-lover, began inviting a small group of his friends to his studio on Saturdays. Among these were his brother, Charles Sordes, the poets Tristan Klingsor and Léon-Paul Fargue, the painters Edouard Benedictus and Séguy, Charles Guérin, the critic M.D. Calvocoressi and, of course, Ravel. They were soon joined by the musician Maurice Delage, who became Ravel's student and most intimate friend; Ricardo Viñes, the Spanish pianist and Ravel's childhood friend, and the conductor D.E. Inghgelbrecht. Also members of Les Apaches were Lucien Garban, Marcel Chadeigne, the decorator Georges Mouveau and the designer Pivet (Larner 1996:66-67).

Every Saturday the group met and, in Léon-Paul Fargue's words: 'We all read or played whatever we had recently written or composed, in the most friendly atmosphere I have ever experienced' (quoted in Roland-Manuel 1947: 33). At Sordes' house it was necessary to stop playing at around one in the morning as the neighbours complained about the noise. Thus in 1904 the group moved their meetings to Delage's summer-house which was separated from other homes so

they could ‘make music all night long when we had missed the last train home’ (Fargue quoted in Roland-Manuel 1947: 34).

At its new quarters the group received new members, a Spanish musician and mathematician, Joaquin Boceta; also Florent Schmitt, Déodat de Séverac, André Caplet, Paul Ladmirault, Cipa Godebski, Synnesvedt, the composer Manuel de Falla, Maurice Tabuteau and the Abbé Léonce. This group held regular meetings through the years and received their last member in 1909. He was Igor Stravinsky.

As a group their tastes and preferences were all very similar in their respective arts of poetry, painting and music. They retained a spirit of equality and friendship in their pursuit of and enthusiasm for new products of imagination. Their favourite poets were Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Corbière, while they preferred the paintings of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Whistler. In music they all shared a love of Russian music as well as of Chopin, but mainly they were fierce supporters of Debussy. They attended almost every performance of Debussy’s opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Paris and spoke publicly of its greatness. A newspaper seller, after one of these performances, gave them their name: ‘Les Apaches’ (The Ruffians) (Larner 1996: 67).

The ten years after the *affaire Ravel* proved to be prolific for the composer. While in 1905 he had failed to win the Prix de Rome, which would have given him financial security, he did manage to secure a place as a celebrity with the publishers Auguste and Jacques Durand. They offered him the same pay as they were giving Debussy for the right of first refusal on anything he was to write.

During this time Ravel visited the town of his birth in the Basque country. It was to become a place of solace for the composer – a quiet sanctuary where he could work and enjoy his leisure time; he regarded it as his spiritual home. Ravel and his family had moved to live in the industrial area outside of Paris and Ravel, wanting to be in Paris, was often forced to find refuge among the brotherhood of Les Apaches. In 1904 Ravel met the Godebski family who were to become perhaps his closest bonds outside his own family. Sunday evenings at the Godebski home were highly enjoyable gatherings of the artistic community of

Paris. The Godebskis were a Polish family who had immigrated to Paris. Xavier Cyprien Godebski, who was known as Cipa, was forty when he met Ravel. He was a great friend to artists of all kinds in Paris. His wife, Ida, was eight years younger and they had two children, Mimie and Jean. Ravel wrote *Ma mère l'oye* for the Godebski children in 1910 (Larner 1996: 83).

After the *affaire Ravel* Alfred Edwards, the editor of *Le Matin*, which had covered the '*affaire'* exhaustively, invited Ravel aboard his yacht. Edwards had used *Le Matin* as an opportunity to present Ravel's case against the scandalous judgement of the Prix de Rome jury. He was married to Misia Godebska, sister of Cipa Godebski and so the Godebskis were also on board. It turned out to be a very happy time for Ravel. He was inspired by what he saw and heard and upon returning home he began to work on two new piano works: the *Sonatine* and the *Miroirs* (Stuckenschmidt 1969: 71).

The death of Ravel's father Pierre-Joseph in 1908 was a heavy blow to him but did not interrupt his work. During this time Ravel completed his longest scores, that of the opera *L'heure espagnole* and the ballet *Daphnis at Chloé*, as well as the bulk of his piano works, many songs, chamber works and also a few orchestral works. He began teaching the English composer Ralph Vaughan-Williams, three years his senior. They worked mostly on orchestration by orchestrating the piano works of Ravel, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin. Vaughan-Williams noted that 'he taught me how to orchestrate in points of colour rather than in lines. Complex, but not complicated was his motto' (Larner 1996: 105). Vaughan-Williams' comment reveals that the 'Impressionist' technique had moved from piano to orchestral writing. This was the field that Ravel was now to explore.

In 1909 the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev mounted his first season of the *Ballets Russes* (the Russian Ballet) in Paris and it was a sensation. The ballet at this point used music from all kinds of sources and was merely a platform for the dancers, Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Ida Rubinstein and Vaslav Nijinsky. For the second Parisian season Diaghilev decided to commission French composers to write the music and Ravel, encouraged by Misia Edwards who was a great patron of the Diaghilev ballet, accepted a commission. The result was the

score of *Daphnis et Chloé.* It took Ravel three years to complete because he worked on it only intermittently. It was staged in the 1912 season with Karsavina and Nijinsky in the starring roles (Stuckenschmidt 1969:115-125).

Ravel then collaborated with Stravinsky whom he grew to know, respect and admire on a new version of *Khovanshchina,* an opera that Mussorsky had not completed before his death. It was a mutually beneficial collaboration as the composers learnt much from each other, devouring each other's work and sharing their love of Mallarmé, and of new music tending towards modernism. They became fairly close and Stravinsky affectionately referred to Ravel as 'the most perfect of Swiss clockmakers' (Nichols 1977: 1).

On 28 June 1914 the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo caused a crisis that by August had developed into the First World War. It pitted France against Germany once more and resulted not only in the loss of ten million lives but also in a complete German phobia that engulfed France after the war. One of the results was a prohibition of the performance of German and Austrian music (Mawer 2000: 18).

Ravel had been declared unfit for military service but his conscience forced him to enlist. He couldn't bear the thought of his friends, members of Les Apaches and his brother fighting alone in the war. He told Maurice Delage, 'France doesn't need me to save her, that's just a rationalisation. Everyone has his faults and mine is to act only with a clear conscience' (Larner 1996: 146). He held onto an ideal that France, the country that had given him life, deserved his support. Not even his most intimate relationship with his mother could keep him from joining up in the war, although it affected Ravel greatly to leave her.

The army had refused Ravel because he was underweight and while he waited to find another way to enlist he began working feverishly on his Piano Trio. He was intent both on finishing the work and enlisting. The Piano Trio was finished in record time by the end of September and in March of 1915, after eight months of pulling strings, Ravel was accepted into the thirteenth Artillery Regiment. He became a driver for the army and, while he was often in danger, never fought on the front line.

German music had been banned from being performed in France during the war and Ravel felt this was a battle he could take on. He disagreed about the banning of German and Austrian music and praised the music of Arnold Schoenberg who was an Austrian. When he received a threat that his stance on German music could result in his own music being banned he did not retreat. In fact, during this period Ravel was nominated for the order of the Légion d'honneur. When he received the telegram telling him of the honour, he replied simply, 'Many thanks beg you contradict I refuse' (Roland-Manuel 1947: 84). Ravel had retained a certain amount of bitterness towards academic authority from his Prix de Rome years.

While the long war continued, Ravel was full of inspiration. In a letter to Florent Schmitt he said, 'I'm brimming over with inspiration, to the point that I'll explode if peace doesn't come soon to lift the lid' (Larner 1996: 156). At the end of 1916 Ravel returned to Paris on sick leave to discover his mother was also not well. She died on 5 January 1917 and this had a profound impact on Ravel. He returned to his duties a month later in reasonably good physical health but immensely depressed. After another month or so his health again began to deteriorate and on 1 June 1917 he was discharged from the French army.

While it seemed at this time that there was no more life in Ravel, he lived for two more decades and although there were periods of creative paralysis, much of his great music was still to come. He began by completing the piano work *Le tombeau de Couperin*, which he had begun before the war. After the end of the war Ravel's life returned to a semblance of what it had been. He had many friends and colleagues around him; he lived with some of them for some time as there were still too many memories of his mother to return to his own house.

And so Ravel began work on two large scores, the opera *L' Enfant et les sortilèges* and *La Valse* which he was creating as a ballet for Diaghilev. *La Valse* was finished first but was rejected by Diaghilev, 'Ravel', he said, 'it's a masterpiece, but it isn't a ballet. It's a portrait of a ballet, a painting of a ballet…' (Larner 1996: 173). Ravel was deeply hurt and the two never collaborated again. After this, Ravel moved to a place of his own outside Paris where he lived till his death.

L'Enfant et les sortilèges took five years to complete. Its title page describes the work as a Lyric Fantasy in Two Parts. It had incredible sets, an inspired libretto by Colette de Jouvenel, wonderful performers and was ready to premier in Monte Carlo in 1925. It was a reeling success and was praised by most of the critics. Ravel turned fifty in that year, and he was commemorated by the *Revue Musicale*, which devoted its April issue to his music. Ravel became accepted as a great composer and was in high demand as both a pianist as well as a conductor (Nichols 1977: 127).

In his declining years Ravel continued to produce music. He completed two piano concertos and numerous orchestral, chamber, as well as instrumental works. He travelled extensively through Europe and the USA as a composer on tour with his own works. He undertook a grand tour of Europe with the pianist Marguerite Long, his preferred interpreter (Mawer 2000: 235), and even took holidays in North Africa.

From 1932 his health began to fail and he was, at times, physically unable to co-ordinate his own movements or express thoughts coherently. In the last two years he would sit at his home at Le Belvédère idly waiting, staring out of the window. His health continued to deteriorate and Ravel was left without much movement and in much pain. Although the doctors believed that there was no actual brain-tumour, they persuaded the composer's brother Edouard Ravel to authorise brain surgery in December 1937. Edouard was told that one hemisphere of his brother's brain had atrophied and that the other could not compensate. Ravel was admitted to the hospital under the pretence that he was having tests done. Two days later the surgery was performed which left him in a coma. On 28 December 1937 Maurice Ravel died (Larner 1996: 213-218).

2. Ravel and the Piano

> The piano is the privileged instrument in Ravel's art, not only because he was a pianist and composed at the keyboard, but because virtually all the fresh trends in his style first appear in the piano music. (Orenstein 1968: 135)

In May 1882 when Ravel was seven years old, he began his first piano lessons with Henry Ghys. Ghys was a respected teacher and was reasonably famous as the composer of the popular *Air Louis XVIII*. He kept a diary which his family preserved and on 31 May 1882 he wrote, 'Today I began teaching a young pupil, Maurice Ravel, who appears to be an intelligent boy. Evidently I'm now doomed to teach children' (Roland-Manuel 1947: 18).

Emile Decombes, a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, was Ravel's second piano teacher. In 1889 Decombes had twenty-four of his piano students perform excerpts from different piano concertos at a recital at the Salle Erard. This was Ravel's first known public performance and he performed part of Moscheles' Third Piano Concerto. In November of that same year Ravel auditioned for a place in the Conservatoire, playing for his audition an excerpt from a Chopin Concerto. He was placed in the preparatory class of Eugene Anthoime. Ricardo Viñes auditioned on the same day and was admitted to the advanced class of Charles de Béroit (Roland-Maunuel 1947: 18-19).

In 1891 Ravel was awarded a gold medal for his playing and was allowed to join Viñes in Bériot's advanced class. The two boys were passionate about music and spent hours playing together at the keyboard. They enjoyed a variety of music ranging from Mozart, Mendelssohn and Franck, to Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Borodin, Glazunov, Chabrier and Satie. These composers were important influences on Ravel's music and inspired him greatly. During his time at the Conservatoire Ravel revealed his personal preferences for certain nineteenth-century composers; Schumann, Weber, Chopin and Liszt (Roland-Manuel 1947: 19-21). His reports for his biannual keyboard exams are housed in France's National Archives. He received favourable remarks for a few years but was

eventually dismissed from Bériot's class in 1895. It is thought that after this Ravel took private lessons with the Spanish pianist Santiago Riéra for about two years (Orenstein 1968: 13-20).

This was the extent of Ravel's formal piano training. He was, apparently, a fairly talented player but was rather indolent when it came to practise. He also had fairly small hands that created technical inadequacies (Woodley in Mawer 2000: 214). It was Ravel's love of music old and new that brought about his eclectic source of influences. Together with Viňes he sight-read his way through a substantial amount of piano repertoire ranging from early composers through to the unpublished scores of his contemporaries. The creation of Ravel's own style and sound world can be traced in the music of the past and present texts he grew to love.

It is Ravel's reverence for older music that established the common view of Ravel as a Neo-classicist. His earliest inspiration stems from the clarity and elegance of the French clavecinistes of the eighteenth century.[5] One of the virtuoso harpsichordists of the time was Francois Couperin. He wrote *l'Art de toucher le clavecin,* a four-volume pedagogy for harpsichord playing containing over 230 pieces of harpsichord music (Kennedy 1996: 166).

Babara L. Kelly states in her essay 'History and homage' (Mawer 2000: 10) that 'at the heart of his teaching methods, Ravel emphasised mastery of technique through the imitation of models'. Ravel told his students; 'Copy, and if while copying, you remain yourself, that's because you have something to say' (Perlemeuter 1998: 67). Ravel held Couperin in great esteem; he valued the simplicity, grace and transparency of his writing. In 1914 Ravel wrote a transcription of a *forlane*[6] by Couperin and within a few months of 'imitating this model' the composer began work on an entire French suite that included a *forlane* of his own.

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[5] The French school of harpsichord playing, (clavecin is the French word for harpsichord).

[6] A less common movement in a Baroque suite.

The *Suite francaise* was completed after Ravel's demobilization from the war in 1917 and he entitled it *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Ravel retains the form of an eighteenth-century suite with six movements; prelude, fugue, forlane, rigaudon, menuet and toccata, but it is not only the structure that Ravel imitates. Orenstein observes that *Tombeau* relates closely to suites of the eighteenth century in texture, rhythm and ornamentation as well as structure. Thus the texture of the prelude is sparse, as often was the case with many of the Preludes that preceded J.S. Bach's Fugues in *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*. Because of the textural complexity of fugal writing the Preludes were often much simpler in texture, rarely using more than two-part polyphony. The prelude from Ravel's *Tombeau* uses rapid ornamentation in the style of Scarlatti's sonatas, in which much of the decoration was left up to the discretion of the performer, (as was the standard performance practice of these Spanish *essercisi*). The fugue's texture is pre-determined by the form, although Ravel clearly enjoyed these complex textures and uses stretto and inversions extensively. The forlane runs parallel to Couperin's forlane in terms of rhythmic detail as well as texture and it is merely Ravel's use of harmony that locates it in the twentieth century. The rigaudon follows tradition in writing out the reprise without the repeats of the opening and the toccata is cast in a sonata form (Orenstien 1968: 184-187). It is part of Ravel's art to combine many elements from previous eras with twentieth-century harmonies and his own distinctive melodies, thus creating unique compositions (Orenstein 1968: 136).

Ravel paid homage to the composers that inspired him. The title *Le Tombeau de Couperin* literally means 'the tomb of Couperin', but in French literature the word *tombeau* meant homage to the dead (Stuckenschmidt 1969: 172). In this work Ravel does not only pay homage to Couperin but he also dedicated each movement to a friend who had been killed in the war. In his autobiographical sketch the composer gives a general dedication: 'the tribute is directed not so much to the individual figure of Couperin as to the whole of French music of the eighteenth century.' (Nichols 1977: 100).

Ravel relished the grace, elegance, poise, simplicity and clarity of this early keyboard music. Another composer from the past whom Ravel revered was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In fact he was Ravel's favourite composer (Kelly in

Mawer 2000: 22). Roland-Manuel writes: 'He loved Mozart with all his heart' (Roland-Manuel 1947: 134) and Ravel himself said in an interview that he felt 'particularly close to Mozart' (Kelly in Mawer 2000: 22).

Mozart played an important role in Ravel's student apprenticeship too. His lessons in counterpoint and harmony at the conservatoire with Gédalge were based on the works of Mozart, stressing the importance of the melodic line, and Ravel played through much of his piano repertoire with Viñes. Mozart seemed the ideal composer to Ravel; he admired the elements that constituted his style as well as his craftsmanship and prolific output (Orenstein 1968: 123). That he drew inspiration from the compositional greats, Ravel was the first to admit. Ravel often quoted Massenet: 'In order to know your own technique, you must learn the technique of other people' (Roland-Manuel 1947: 24). Ravel took this maxim very seriously, often arranging, transcribing and orchestrating the works of other composers. It is interesting to note that he did no such thing to the music of Mozart. Kelly offers us an answer in her essay 'History and homage'; she speculates that 'he had nothing to add to the work of a composer whom he described as perfection' (Kelly in Mawer 2000: 23).

Ravel himself reveals the extent of his identification with Mozart in an excerpt from his 'reflections on music':

> If I were called upon to do so [formulate the principles of my aesthetic], I would ask to be allowed to identify myself with the simple pronouncements made by Mozart on this subject. He confined himself to saying that there is nothing that music cannot undertake to do, or dare, or portray, provided it continues to charm and always remains music. (Quoted in Orenstein 1968: 117-118)

The G Major Piano Concerto was based, according to Ravel, on Mozart's work in the genre. He was also influenced by Saint-Saëns' writing for the piano. What he aimed at was a brightness and liveliness, with a tonal and technical brilliance that was totally without the drama and bombast of Romantic piano composers whose works, Ravel suggests, were written 'against the piano' (Orenstein 1968: 101-103). Larner suggests that Mozart's Clarinet Quintet was a model for the

beautiful, melodious slow movement ‘Adagio Assai’ of the G Major Concerto (Larner 2000: 211).

As a lover of the poets of the Symbolist era, Ravel set many of the texts to music hence his numerous songs such as *Un Grand Sommeil noir, Sur l’herbe, Ronsard à son âme* and *Rêves*. Again here the influence of Mozart can be seen. Ravel admired Mozart’s arias deeply and cherished their ‘limpid grace’, which he found echoing in the songs of his beloved teacher Gabriel Fauré (Orenstein 1968: 124).

Ravel’s chamber music is also connected to Mozart in its classical treatment of texture and form. Orenstein claims that these chamber works certainly are derived from the music of Mozart (1968: 135).

There were a number of nineteenth-century composers that Ravel respected and enjoyed, among them Chopin, Liszt, Bellini, Weber, Schubert, Saint-Saëns and the Russian School, predominantly Borodin, Mussorsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Their degree of actual influence is variable, but Ravel and Les Apaches enjoyed listening to their music. Ravel played their piano compositions, studied their scores and even orchestrated certain of them (Orenstein 1968: 124-125).

Frédéric Chopin, although Polish by birth, lived in France all his adult life and wrote almost exclusively for the piano. These two facts alone might have been enough to spike Ravel’s interest. But it was Chopin’s lyricism, poetic beauty and originality that most attracted the younger composer (Orenstein 1968: 124). Ravel must have felt a strong identification with Chopin, given that the piano constitutes both their largest and most personal respective compositional outputs. Orenstein suggests a further similarity in the fact that they both found their distinctive individual paths early on in their careers and then spent the remainder of their time perfecting a relatively small number of works in that personal aesthetic (1968: 139).

It has been recorded that Ravel practised Chopin’s *Études* to improve his technique (Nichols 1977: 143). Chopin began, with these *Études* and certain of his other works, to move to a new level of virtuosity for the keyboard and they remain an essential part of the pianist’s repertoire. Ravel continued, in a similar

vein, to write piano works that have taken up a position of importance in the repertoire for the virtuoso pianist. It was, in fact, with his *Miroirs* that he first explored this type of virtuosity in a twentieth-century idiom, a virtuosity that later culminates in the extraordinary gymnastic and brilliantly characterised *Gaspard de la nuit*. 'Scarbo' from that work was described by the famous pianist Walter Gieseking as being among the most difficult in the pianist's repertoire (Orenstein 1968: 136).

Calvocoressi, the critic to whom Ravel dedicated the 'Alborada del gracioso', described the piece after the first performance of *Miroirs* by Viñes in a review, which appeared in *Le Courrier Musicale*. He wrote: '…'Alborada' is a scherzo, a big independent scherzo in the manner of Chopin and Balakirev' (quoted in Orenstein 1968: 49-50). Chopin had developed the scherzo from Beethoven's sonatas into an autonomous form and here Ravel uses that concept for the form of the 'Alborada'. Ravel enjoyed classical forms; here one can see that he did not restrict himself to structures from the classical era but also used advances made by the Romantics.

What Chopin had begun, in terms of nineteenth-century pianism, was taken to new heights with the virtuoso pianist and prolific composer, Franz Liszt. Liszt, like Chopin and Ravel himself, was a 'citizen of Paris' and a devotee of the piano. Liszt's remarkable technique as well as his passionate pianistic writing inspired Ravel (Nichols 1977: 15). Ravel used one of Liszt's works 'Les jeux d'eaux à la ville d'este' (1877) as inspiration and the 'starting point' for his own *Jeux d'eau* (1901) (Harrison 1993: 5).

Ravel extended the technical and stylistic experiments that Liszt had made with this work. These strategies to expand the virtuosic vocabulary of the piano were developed even further in the *Miroirs* which abounds in arpeggios, cascading notes and double trills, quite obviously Lisztian in origin (Nichols 1977: 41 – 44). Ravel was also impressed with Liszt's orchestration, calling it 'dazzling, with its powerful yet light sonority' (Orenstein 1968: 125n).

Camille Saint-Saëns was a formidable figure in French composition during the Romantic era. Ravel appreciated the clarity and refinement of his music, as well

as its freshness and inventiveness. Saint-Saëns adhered to certain stringent musical structures despite his Romantic aesthetic and Ravel also retained a strong structural sense in his writing. Ravel was also impressed by Saint-Saëns' orchestration and he often consulted the miniature scores of his five Piano Concertos (Roland-Manuel 1947: 134 - 135). Ravel said of his own Piano Concerto in G Major that it was written 'in the spirit of Mozart and Saint-Saëns' (Orenstein 1968: 204).

The other French composer of the nineteenth century with whom Ravel is aligned was Charles Gounod. Ravel considered this Prix de Rome winner 'a forerunner of genius' (Roland-Manuel 1947: 135) and 'an important precursor of the modern French school' (Orenstein 1968: 124). Gounod was not, however, a composer of piano music, unlike the other composers that so strongly influenced Ravel. He wrote mainly operas and sacred vocal music. It was in his vocal music that Ravel sensed opulent harmonies (Orenstein 1968: 124).

Ravel was also very fond of the two non-French opera composers Vincenzo Bellini and Carl Maria von Weber (Roland-Manuel 1947: 134). He was also very partial to the music of Franz Schubert with his subtle harmonies and sense of colour. Schubert was considered a 'classical' Romantic composer who retained lyricism and elegance in his music, which appealed to Ravel (Orenstein 1968: 123). Ravel was likewise charmed by Schubert's simplicity of form and his assimilation of popular music: Ravel's own *Valses nobles et sentimentales* is an affectionate if in some ways sardonic reference to Schubert's cycles of Waltzes and Ländler.

While Ravel's interest mainly lay in French composers whose works were removed from the heavy Germanic Romantic idiom, he showed a great interest and devotion to the Russian school of composition. In the nineteenth century five Russian composers - Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorsky and Rimsky-Korsakov - formed a national school of composition and became known as the Russian Five, or 'the mighty handful' (Kennedy 1996: 256). Perhaps Ravel respected their

nationalism but he was greatly inspired by their music with which he first came into contact at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1889.[7]

He was most fond of Mussorsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. His orchestration of Mussorsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* was to become more celebrated than its original, which sounds, in comparison, like a piano transcription. Mussorsky was exploring orchestral sounds on the piano and the writing consists of thick chords and extends over the full range of the piano. It lends itself to a large orchestra, as the work is thick in texture. Ravel's orchestral version has proven more popular and is considered more authentically Russian. Borodin was perhaps Ravel's favourite of the bunch (Roland-Manuel 1947: 135). Ravel wrote a pastiche in his style, *A la manière de … Borodin.* Helene Jourdan-Morhange, explains this work as 'an extract from Borodin, apart from a little Ravelian resolution which glides past the ear' (Perlemuter 1998: 63). Nichols explains the Ravelian resolution as flattened sixes and sevenths and mediant pedals (1977: 90). Rimsky-Korsakov was a master of orchestration. Ravel had been awed, as a boy, by his orchestral works while watching him conduct his music at the World Exhibition. Rimsky-Korsakov had also orchestrated works of the other members of 'the Five'. Orenstein highlights the influence of the Russian school as their use of modes, Russian exoticism, innovative orchestral colouring and fresh spontaneity (1968: 125).

All these past composers inspired Ravel and gave him a traditional framework in which to express his unique voice, combining sheer twentieth-century innovation with established musical elements and conventions. As I look at each work of the *Miroirs* it will become evident how Ravel's pianistic influences are integrated into the highly original surfaces of the cycle. Ravel was also strongly influenced by contemporary musicians. These composers influenced the development of his harmonic style and highly contemporary sound world.

Erik Satie was unknown as a composer at that time. Ravel, with Viñes, discovered his *Gymnopédies* and *Sarabandes* before they were published.

[7] See page 6.

Ravel's father organised a meeting with Satie who played the piano at the Café de la Nouvelle Athènes. Satie remained an important influence for Ravel. He described it himself:

> Another significant influence, somewhat unique, and deriving at least partially from Chabrier, is that of Erik Satie, which has had appreciable effect upon Debussy, myself and indeed most of the modern French composers. Satie was possessed of an extremely keen intelligence. He was the inventor's mind par excellence. He was a great experimenter … Simply and ingeniously Satie pointed the way, but as soon as another musician took to the trail he had indicated, Satie would immediately change his own orientation and without hesitation open up still another path to new fields of experimentation … we have today many works which might not have come into existence if Satie had never lived. (Quoted in Orenstein 1968: 17)

Ravel acknowledged Satie's influence on one of his earliest compositions, *Ballade de la Reine morte d'aimer* (1893) with its use of the Dorian mode. He continued to use a mixture of tonality and modality in his melodies, a characteristic trait of Satie (Orenstein 1968: 18). He was also fond of Satie's harmonies and his predilection for using sevenths and ninths. The influence of Satie can also be heard in the 'frozen' harmonies of the slow movement of the Piano Concerto in G Major, with its dissonances and removal of harmonic functionality. Satie's influence ranges not only from Ravel's melodic style to his indirect harmonies but also inspired his whimsical titles, anti-academic attitude and pioneering drive (Myers 1960: 47).

Ravel and Viňes met Emmanuel Chabrier in 1893 in his home where they performed for him his *Trois valses romantiques*. That same year he acknowledged Chabrier's influence on the early piano work *Sérénade grotesque* (Orenstein 1968: 17). Roland-Manuel states that of the modern composers Ravel's chief admiration was for Chabrier (1947: 135). He led the modern French school of composers and Ravel specifically valued his tenderness and lyricism (Orenstein 1968: 124). Chabrier also used modes extensively, influencing Ravel's harmonic style.

Ravel's early piano work shows a strong resemblance to Chabrier. The *Pavane pour une infante défunte* was criticised for being too imitative of Chabrier as Ravel had not yet found his own method of expression (Roland-Manuel 1947: 29). In 1913 Ravel wrote the piano work *A la manière de Chabrier*, a paraphrase of an aria of Gounod's *Faust* in the style of Chabrier. It contains many seventh chords, which prompted Jourdan-Morhange to explain: 'you will realise the extent [when you listen to this work] to which Ravel knew his Chabrier' (Perlemuter 1998: 63). Ravel described Chabrier as 'the most profoundly personal, the most profoundly French of our composers' (Orenstein 1968: 16).

Finally, one cannot ignore the influence of Ravel's teacher and mentor Gabriel Fauré. He is acknowledged as one of France's greatest composers with a delicate and harmonically exploratory style, a 'poet of the piano' (Kennedy 1996: 244). Fauré was an encouraging and liberal teacher allowing Ravel to develop his own means of expression. Ravel in turn showed loyal respect to his teacher; inspired by his sensitivity, grace and subtle lyricism. Ravel dedicated his *Jeux d'eau* and the String Quartet to 'my dear teacher Gabriel Fauré' (Orenstein 1968: 20).

Ravel was also an ardent fan and supporter of the music of Debussy but there is no information suggesting that Debussy directly influenced any of his works (Myers 1960: 19). Certainly Debussy's significant piano works were written after 1905 and Ravel had also claimed priority to the Impressionist style of piano writing.[8]

Larner describes Debussy as someone 'who was to become both an inspiration and, at least as far as the press was concerned, a rival to Maurice Ravel' (1996: 24). Both had attended the World Exhibition, studied at the Conservatoire, entered the *Prix de Rome*, befriended Erik Satie, visited cafés and socialised with contemporary artists and poets. Ravel and his Apaches were very enthusiastic about Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune,* attending regular performances of that work. Ravel even stated at the end of his life that 'it was not

[8] See page 9.

until he heard that work that he understood what music was all about' (Larner 1996: 74). The passionate admiration that Ravel had for Debussy was mutual. Debussy was impressed by his young contemporary, borrowing the scores of works such as the *Sites auriculaires* and the String Quartet in F of which Debussy remarked to Ravel 'in the name of the gods of music, and in my name too, do not change anything in your quartet' (Larner 1996: 71).

Despite their common heritage these two composes each followed their own course and while there are similarities between them, Ravel certainly is not the mere 'clever imitator' of Debussy that Pierre Lalo described him as (Orenstein 1968: 32). Ravel claimed that he had followed a direction 'opposite to that of Debussy's symbolism' (Orenstein 1968: 126). Surely their compositions reciprocally inspired each other and, while circumstances prevented them from being friends, they certainly both deserve honoured places in the history of twentieth-century French pianism.

A crucial aspect of Ravel's sound world comes from his love of all things Spanish. Ravel valued his Basque and Spanish heritage from his mother, calling Spain his 'second musical homeland' (Orenstein 1968: 107). He grew up listening to Spanish songs and his Iberian influence can be seen in some key works: *Rapsodie Espagnole, '*Habanera' from *Sites auriculaires, L'heure Espagnole*, the 'Alborada del gracioso' from *Miroirs* and *Boléro* (Myers 1960: 112). Ravel respected the Spanish flair and exoticism in music specifically in the composers de Falla, Granados and Turina (Orenstein 1968: 125). He had the ability to introduce rhythms, dance effects and detailed Spanish character to works in a very personal manner, even though he had only visited Spain as an adult.

Ravel's piano aesthetic is the result of a carefully and personally chosen path of concentrated study of past composers and contemporary styles. He took from composers that which appealed to him; he absorbed certain qualities and stylistic elements and yet remained totally unique. His preferences styled his expression and his context influenced his musical language. These features of his style will be drawn more closely into a discussion and analysis of the piano works that make up the *Miroirs.*

3. Ravel: Then and Now

Ravel lived in an age in which art and music thrived. There were regular public performances of the music of contemporary composers as well as the music of the great composers of the past. There were institutions in which to study music, publishers who provided income for composers, performers of a high level ready to premier new works, as well as an educated audience that regularly attended concerts. This was true for most of Europe but Paris, at the turn of the century, was the hub of musical activity.

When one looks at an inventory of Ravel's work (Appendix B in Nichols 1977), it is evident that the year of publication and of the first performance are often the same and that they almost always occur within three years of the date of composition. For example the *Miroirs*, completed in 1905, was first performed by Ricardo Viñes in January 1906 and published by Eschig in that same year (Nichols 1977: 173).

The gramophone had been invented and patented in the late nineteenth century and was available to play recordings. Debussy praised this great invention: 'The gramophone seems to me a marvellous instrument. Moreover, it assures music of a complete and meticulous immortality' (Orenstein 1968: 247). The recording industry was taking off with new technologies ranging from piano rolls (acoustical and electrical) to discs. The pianola was invented in 1904 by Edwin Welte and was used to produce the earliest perforated paper rolls. The Aeolian corporation patented these instruments, which allowed the paper to reproduce the notes of a composition as well as its interpretation by the performer (Kennedy 1996: 561). According to a list of over 250 historical recordings compiled by Jean Touzelet, (Appendix B in Orenstein), Ravel had more works recorded during his lifetime than any other composer until the Second World War. Virtually his entire oeuvre was recorded (Orenstein 1968: 247).

These historical recordings were made between 1912 and 1939 and feature a range of artists. The piano works were recorded by various performers; from Ravel himself to luminaries such as Alfred Cortot, Walter Gieseking, Robert

Casadesus and Myra Hess. There were recordings by other pianists as well as anonymous ones. Viñes, however, is not credited with any of the piano recordings. Ronald Woodley speculates that perhaps some of the anonymous recordings may well have been made by Viñes who had an aversion to recording and may have preferred, therefore, to remain anonymous (Woodley in Mawer 2000: 221).

The *Miroirs*, or parts thereof, were first recorded in 1912. No single recording of all five works was undertaken in the early years. (A complete recording of the *Miroirs* was first made by Robert Casadesus in 1951 (Woodley in Mawer 2000: 237).) Many of the early recordings were anonymous and the most commonly recorded of the five pieces is the 'Alborada del gracioso'. Walter Gieseking recorded 'Alborada' and 'La Valleé des cloches' in 1939 but only recorded the entire set in 1956. Vlado Perlemuter first recorded the set in 1955 and re-recorded it in 1973. In the sixties there was interest in Ravel's music and pianist Werner Haas recorded Ravel's entire oeuvre. Svyatoslav Richter also recorded the entire set twice, first in 1964 and recently in 1994. Cecille Ousset, a formidable performer of French music, recorded the *Miroir*s in 1971 and fellow Frenchman Francois-Joël Thiollier recorded all the piano works of Ravel for the Naxos series in 1994. There are over thirty complete recordings of Ravel's *Miroirs* (Red Muse).[9]

Ravel himself recorded 'Oiseaux tristes' in 1922 and 'La Vallée des cloches' in 1929. Ravel's recording of 'Oiseaux tristes' is interesting as it shows that the composer's conception of the work cannot be read literally from his score: he used changes of tempi for character realisation and often disturbs the rhythmic flow of accompanying triplets or semiquavers to allow for a melodic figuration to be interpreted (Woodley in Mawer 2000: 223). Ravel told Perlemuter that if one plays this work strictly as it is written, one loses the character (Perlemuter 1998: 21).

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[9] Red Muse Classical Catalogue 2005, the definitive guide to classical recordings produced in association with The Gramophone Classical Music Magazine.

Besides these historic recordings of Ravel's piano music, it is also instructive to read about performances at the time. There were regular music concerts around Paris and a special nationalist society, the *Société Nationale de Musique*, emerged to support and publicise French music. Ravel had many works premiered there; first was *Sites auriculaires* in 1898, *Schéhérazade* in 1899, *Pavane pour une Infante défunte* and *Jeux d'eau* performed by Viňes in 1902, *Miroirs* performed again by Viňes in 1906 and *Histoires naturelles* in 1907 (Roland-Manuel 1947: 57).

But the audience of the *Société Nationale* were conservative and not always supportive of new works. Added to that was a growing concern that the *Société* was being controlled by Vincent d'Indy, who was not an ally of Ravel and Fauré. Therefore in 1910 Fauré, Ravel, Schmitt, Dukas and a few other composers met and formed a new society that would run in opposition; they called it the *Société Musicale Indépendante* (S.M.I.) (Nichols 1977: 33).

The first concert of the S.M.I. was held on the 20th April 1910 and included the first performance of Ravel's *Ma Mère l'Oye*. The S.M.I. went on to hold concerts showcasing the works of Satie, Fauré and Debussy as well as the music of little known composers. In 1911 they held a concert in which the names of the composers were withheld and the audience was encouraged to vote on their opinion of each works' authorship. One of Ravel's works, *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*, was attributed to Satie and to Kodály with only a 'minute majority' correctly crediting Ravel (Roland-Manuel 1947: 58-60).

There were several newspapers that took a great interest in the contemporary music scene;[10] their critics very often held opposing views and opinions creating a competitive edge between the various compositional 'camps'. These critics were well-educated and thoroughly knowledgeable about music and attended the concerts of the *Société Nationale* as well as the S.M.I. Jean Marnold, from the *Mercure musical* in the *Mercure de France,* supported Ravel. Stuckenschmidt

[10] See pages 8 - 9 on how the newspapers were involved in the *Affaire Ravel* and in the strained relationship with fellow composer Claude Debussy.

calls him ‘the most passionate champion of Debussy and Ravel among the older music critics’ and describes him as a close friend of Ravel (1969: 74). Marnold wrote in April 1904 that ‘one should remember the name of Maurice Ravel. He is one of the masters of tomorrow’ (Orenstein 1968: 40).

Another of Ravel’s supporters and a fellow member of Les Apaches was M.D. Calvocoressi. He was such an ardent supporter that Debussy referred to him as a ‘valet de chambre’ (Nichols 1987: 177). He attended the first performance of the *Miroirs* on 6 January 1906 as part of a recital of the *Société Nationale* by Ricardo Viñes and wrote a favourable review of it in *Le Courrier Musical*:

> ‘Oiseaux tristes’ is something extremely new, a rather extended étude (in the same sense that painters use this word) and with perfect verity of notation. The same is true of ‘La Vallée des cloches’. On the other hand, ‘Barque sur l’océan’ is a veritable small symphonic poem, constructed very vigorously, and ‘Alborada’ is a scherzo in the manner of Chopin and Balakirev. If I am not mistaken, ‘Noctuelles’ is a sort of étude (this time in the pianistic sense), which is also realised in an extremely fresh manner … But what I find most remarkable in these diverse pieces are their emotional qualities. In ‘Oiseaux tristes’ and ‘La Vallée des cloches’ there is a great depth of feeling, of intimate feeling, totally devoid of grandiloquence. ‘Barque sur l’océan’ is once again beautiful, intense poetry. The ‘humour,’ the frank and vivacious fantasy of ‘Alborada’ merit the highest praise. (Quoted in Orenstein 1968: 49-50)

The editor of *Le Matin,* Alfred Edwards, was another of Ravel’s supporters. He was married to Misia Godebska, the sister of Cipa Godebska, who was a dear and intimate friend of Ravel. Edwards was a prominent and affluent publisher in Parisian society and he sealed his allegiance to Ravel during the *affaire Ravel,* which occurred as a result of the Prix de Rome competition, when he allowed his paper to side with Ravel (Stuckenschmidt 1969: 71).

The critic who had the worst rapport with Ravel was Pierre Lalo, who worked for *Le Temps* as critic for over forty years. He was the son of the composer Edouard Lalo and was apparently very erudite about music although his writings suggest he was highly conservative. He disliked the music of Ravel and often wrote scathing reports attacking not only the works but also Ravel in person. Writing

about *Schéhérazade*: ‘If this is M. Ravel’s idea of an overture ‘constructed in the classical manner’, then we must say that M. Ravel has a vivid imagination’ (Nichols 1987: 13). And about *Histoires naturelles*: ‘I have to admit that in several ways his music is perfectly adapted to the text: it is just as precious, just as laboured, just as dry and almost unmusical: a collaboration of arbitrary harmonies, industriously mixed, the most elaborate and over-complicated chord progressions’ (Mawer 2000: 257).

Lalo also criticised Ravel’s piano work *Jeux d’eau* by comparing it to Debussy. Ravel objected and wrote a letter to Lalo claiming priority of the pianistic ideas. Lalo published the letter in 1907, heightening the tension between Ravel and Debussy (Larner 1996: 91).

Despite Lalo’s forty-year crusade against Ravel, the latter was highly successful and internationally recognised. After Debussy’s death he took his place as France’s most famous composer. Ravel’s piano works exceed the virtuosity of those by Debussy or any other French twentieth-century composer. In creating the technical masterpieces that are the *Miroirs*, Ravel marked his presence in the modern era of music. Roland-Manuel wrote in 1947: ‘Even today pianists are intimidated rather than charmed by these magic mirrors, only keeping in their repertory the ‘Alborada del gracioso’ where the dry and biting virtuosity is contrasted, Spanish-wise, with the swooning flow of the love-lorn melodic line which interrupts the angry buzzing of guitars’ (1947: 42).

In that same year Norman Demuth wrote:

> On the piano he brought a romantic imagination to bear as fertile as that of Schumann, and while we may tire of the *Sonatine* because every budding pianist has it thrust before him, we can never tire of the sombreness of *Gaspard de la nuit*, the eerie ‘Le Gibet’, the dazzling ‘Scarbo’. It may be that the substance of *Miroirs* is not profound, but there is a place in music for exquisite taste and judgement, for the picturesque, for romanticism separated from introspection. Why cannot it be acknowledged that Ravel had greatness in the very slenderness of his textures? (Demuth 1947: 179)

There have been numerous recordings of the entire oeuvre of Ravel's piano music by famous older pianists such as Robert Casadesus and Vlado Perlemuter, as well as by new generation performers like Werner Haas and Francois-Joël Thiollier. Ravel's piano music is often included in the concert repertoire for its interpretive as well as its technical challenges. It has not lost its fascination for either the pianist or the listener.

PART TWO

4. *Miroirs*

Marguerite Long, an expert Ravel performer, explains the title *Miroirs*:

> The title in itself is an aesthetic proposition. It underlies what the Impressionists have amply proved – the pre-eminence of reflected light from the direct image in the appeal to our sensibility and in the creation of an illusion. These pieces are intensely descriptive and pictoral. They banish all sentiment in expression but offer to the listener a number of refined sensory elements which can be appreciated according to his imagination. (James 1987: 44)

It is from this perspective that the analysis of the *Miroirs* will be made; that is to say, they will be explored and examined through their musical parameters in order for their unique descriptiveness and inventiveness to come to light. The way in which Ravel worked with the intrinsic musical features in order to create his particular sound world form one part of the analysis; discussions of influences and context will provide a second framing for each individual analysis.

4.1. *Miroirs*: 'Noctuelles'

The first work in the *Miroirs* is 'Noctuelles' meaning night moths. It was dedicated to the poet Léon-Paul Fargue and was inspired by his lines *'Les noctuelles des hangars parent, d'un vol gauche, Cravater d'autres pouters'* (The night moths in their barns launch themselves clumsily into the air, going from one perch to another). Ravel and Fargue were known to have socialised well into the early hours of the morning and could be considered to be nocturnal like these moths (Nichols 1995: 6).

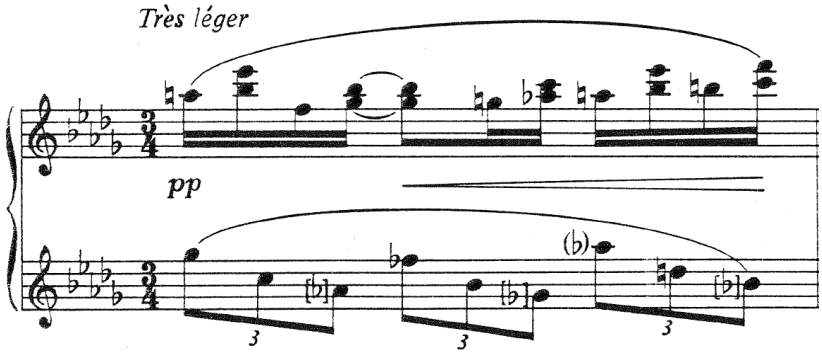
The notion of night in this work is not a Romanticised idea as in Chopin's *Nocturnes* but is rather, as Stuckenschmidt suggests, a social kind of evening; the kind of evening Ravel would have enjoyed with his friends. He uses the metaphor of the moths to describe himself and his associates. Stuckenschmidt also suggests that Ravel's idea of the night is closely related to Paul Verlaine's poem *Un grand sommeil noir* (1969: 83).

Although Ravel was trying to escape from *Jeux d'eau,* the 'Noctuelles' is surprisingly reminiscent of it, especially through the extensive use of seventh chords (Howat in Mawer 2000: 78). The work seems to be a direct and progressive development of the Impressionist technique of *Jeux d'eau,* merely replacing the splashing water of the fountain with the activity of the night moths. The *Miroirs* can be considered Impressionist; the title alone toys with the idea of reflection. Each work also refers to an external source, which is interpreted through its mirrored reflection (Myers 1960: 157). Orenstein explains that the title *Miroirs* implies 'an objective, though personal, reflection of reality' (1968: 159).

It is the arresting harmonic language of 'Noctuelles' that gives it particular impact and makes it an interesting way to start the set. It confirms Ravel's own statement that the *Miroirs* marked a change in his harmonic development: the harmonic progressions are decidedly unpredictable. Burge not only points out the harmonic complexity but also highlights rhythmic complexity and intricacy (1990: 47). While Ravel's use of harmony is unique, the form is roughly a sonata form and Ravel follows its tonal pattern with the outer sections remaining in the same key of D-flat major (Nichols 1977: 42). One of the defining characteristics of

Ravel's music is his desire to retain elements of the past; very often, as in this case, it is the formal structure that remains conventional while individual parameters are treated in a unique and distinctively unconventional manner. The harmonic unorthodoxy, in particular, is designed to convey a realistic fluttering and wheeling of the night moths through the use of daring placing and spacing of dissonant and discordant appoggiaturas (Nichols 1977: 42).

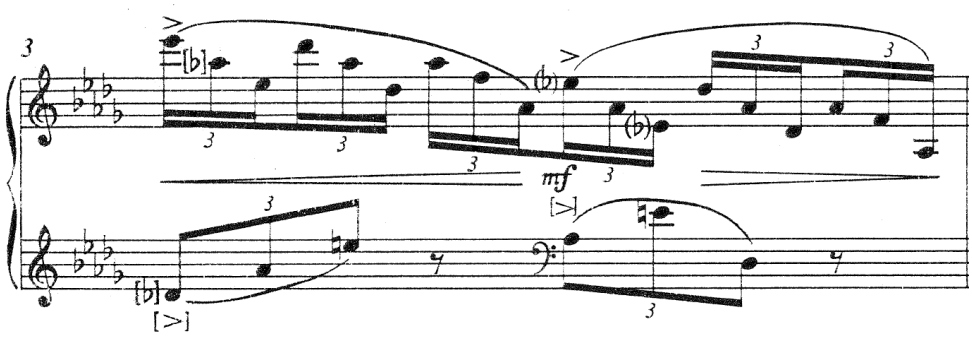
The very first bar is full of interest. It begins immediately with the complex rhythm of three triplet quavers in the left hand against four semiquavers in the right. The second beat exchanges two of the semiquavers for a quaver, as well as introduces a tie on the first note (which obscures the beat) before returning to the original rhythm of the first beat for the third beat of the 3/4 time-signature. Added to this complexity are seven accidentals, a chromatic passage in the lower voice of the right hand, seventh chord arpeggios in the left hand and very specific dynamic instructions. The texture sounds busy and Ravel's marking of *très léger* suggests the touch needed to convey the effect of night moths in their flight (see Example 1).



Example 1: Bar 1

This first bar is designed to create an effect or atmosphere and is not apparently melodic. However, within this polyphony there is the outline of a melody, which appears in bar 3 (see Example 3). It consists of three notes in descending order, namely E-flat, D-flat and A-flat, creating the falling intervals of a major 2nd and a perfect 4th. This interval of a perfect 4th functions rather like a motive throughout the work and Howat attributes it to Chabrier's influence (Howat in Mawer 2000: 78). This thematic idea is used throughout 'Noctuelles', perhaps suggesting the image of moths falling towards the ground; it also contributes to the melancholic

mood in which the piece is shrouded. Framed by semiquaver triplets the melody does not disturb the movement and flow created by the first two bars and is immediately repeated an octave lower.
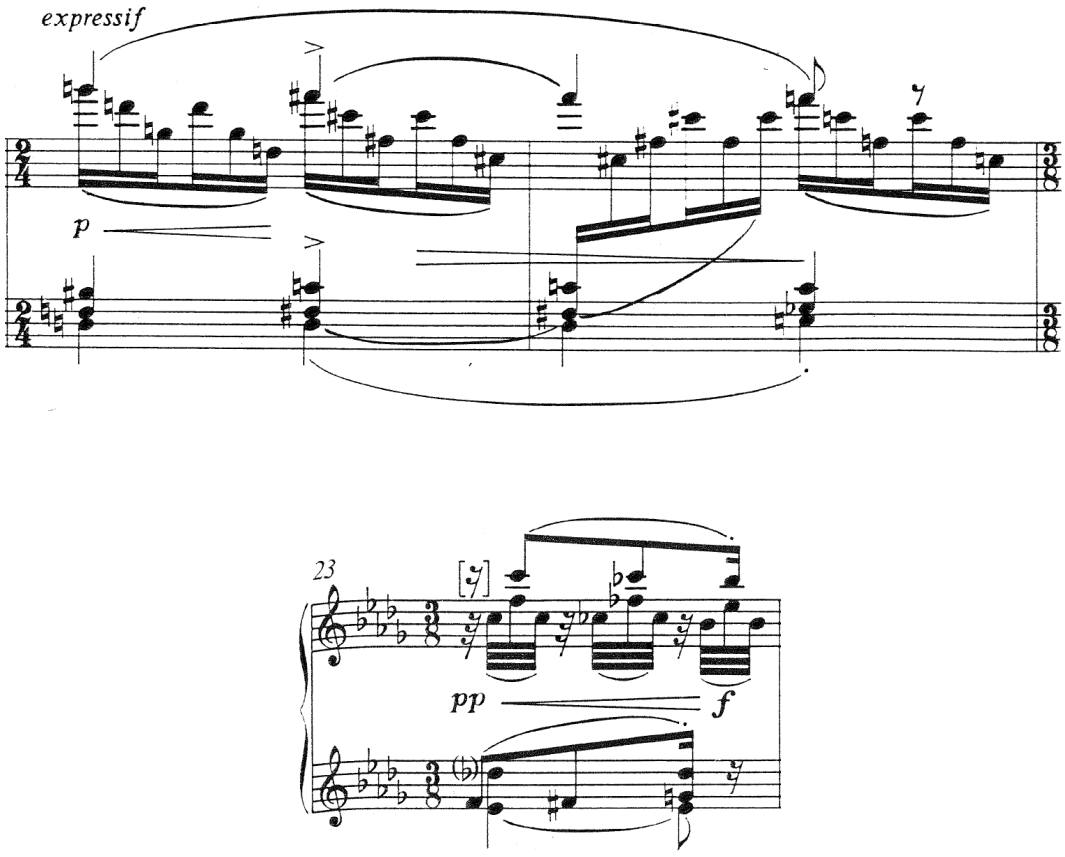


Example 2: Bar 3

After the occurrence of the theme the atmospheric opening bars recur at a lower pitch and with a directionally different left hand. This is followed by a quick run sequence to the upper register of the piano and the work comes to a surprising halt on staccato 2nds separated with rests. Ravel's most typical intervals are 7ths and 2nds.

At bar 10 the opening of the work is repeated and this time the melodic element is increased through the extension of the falling interval. It is repeated twice at a different pitch initially and then the major 2nd occurs in sequence until another ascending run brings the piece to a second pause on a *ppp* chord with open 5ths. The use of open as well as parallel 5ths was typically Impressionistic, the intention being to create tonal ambivalence by omitting the third of the chord.

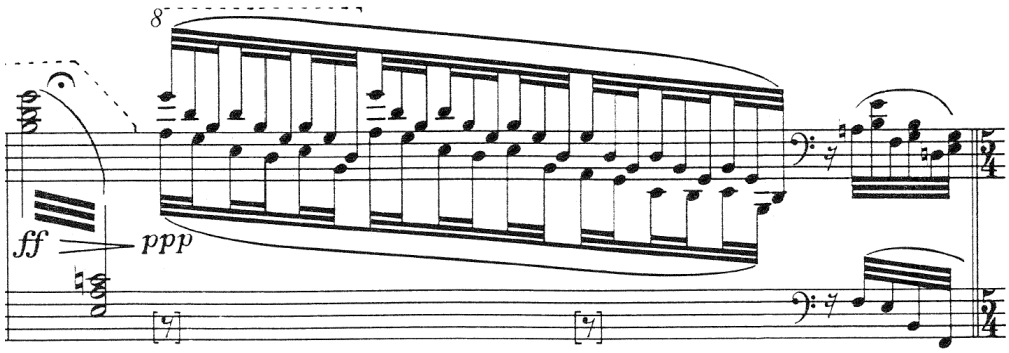
The second part of the opening section at bar 21 also uses a descending three-note melody but it is now chromatic. It is first portrayed in an uneven rhythm of crotchet, minim, crotchet over two bars in 2/4 and is followed in syncopation by a regular beat pattern with the melody on the off beats in one bar of 3/8. These are accompanied by flowing right hand notes in semiquaver triplets and demisemiquavers as well as by chords in the left hand which range from diminished chords, seventh chords as well as a simple A-flat major chord (which

brings some semblance of traditional harmony as it is the dominant of the home key of D-flat major). This is repeated twice.



Example 3: Bars 21 - 23

After the second repetition the work continues to change time-signature regularly until it reaches the middle section. This serves to displace the flow of the music and alerts the listener to some kind of rhythmic disruption. The time-signature changes from 2/4 to 3/8 twice as has already been discussed. After that it goes from 5/8 to 2/4 to 5/8 to 6/8, changing almost every two bars (Nichols 1977: 42). Before arriving at the middle section a large crescendo and an upward melodic movement bring the work to a climax with a trill between the hands, with the right hand playing an E-flat minor chord juxtaposed with the left hand's F major chord.
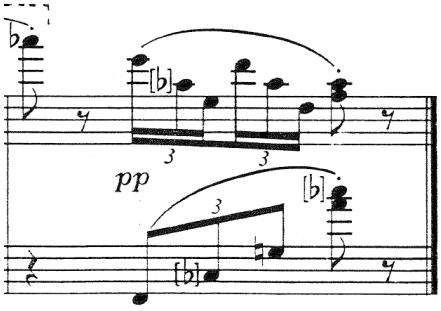


Example 4: Bar 36

Liszt used the juxtaposition of different chords in a trill in the climax of the *Waldesrauchen* and Vladimir Jankélévitch suggests that *Waldesrauchen* provided a model for 'Noctuelles'. Both works follow the double-handed trill with a descending cascade of notes in a two-against-three rhythm written in quasi grace-note notation. *Waldesrauchen* also features a constant running of notes under a melody and uses polyrhythms as part of its intricate texture. However Ravel surpasses this model by using both hands (rather than just one) to create the running part, making it technically more difficult and audibly more intricate and complex (Jankélévitch 1956: 33).

The descending cascade signals the arrival of the middle section at bar 37. This section has a much clearer texture and is centred around the note F, which serves as a pedal point on the offbeat for 14 bars. The melody, which exists in block chords (there are no running passages here), is closely linked to the melodic ideas from the exposition section creating a sense of unity and careful planning. This section is far more Romantic, lending itself to *rubato* and *espressivo* playing. The melodic ideas are strung together to create longer lines and there is an atmosphere of open space and the presence of time giving it a more relaxed, unhurried feel in contrast to the constant textural fluttering of the first section. A couple of delicate quick running passages appear between the phrases, however, typically Ravelian in their whimsicality and sparkle, despite the generally sombre context of the slow section.

The return of the opening section is not clearly marked as Ravel mixes excerpts from the exposition with pedal points now on B-flat. Finally a repeated sequence of the opening bar in the right hand (bars 80 to 84) brings the return of the

melody originally heard in bar 3, signalling the decisive beginning of the third section. It is not an exact repetition of the exposition but follows the tonal sense of a recapitulation with the second part being a fifth lower than the original (Nichols 1977: 42). This time the climactic trill consists of a C-flat major seventh chord in the right hand and a B-flat major chord in the left. The descending cascade that follows is extended into a type of cadenza leading towards the coda in bar 121. The coda begins slowly and expressively but suddenly hurtles up the keyboard with a quick fluttering passage, arriving on the highest A-flat. An exact repetition of the first beat of bar 3 follows, unifying the piece; it ends on the tonic chord of D-flat major without a tonic.



Example 5: Bar 131

4.2. *Miroirs*: ‘Oiseaux tristes’

‘Sad Birds’ in translation, the second work in the *Miroirs* was actually the first of the five pieces to be written. Ravel was working on it when Ricardo Viñes told him that Debussy was considering writing in such a free form that it would seem improvised. Ravel welcomed this idea saying ‘I would really like to do something to free myself from *Jeux d’eau*’ (Larner 1996: 89). While he did not achieve this in ‘Noctuelles’ he certainly did in ‘Oiseaux tristes’. The work does in fact sound spontaneous and improvised and is Ravel’s response to Debussy’s notion of a structure that seems entirely to unfold according to its content.

The idea for the melodic kernel of the piece came when Ravel was in the forest at Fontainbleau. Vuillermoz explains:

> He was staying with friends and one morning he heard a blackbird whistling a tune and was enchanted by its elegant, melancholy arabesque. He had merely to transcribe this tune accurately, without changing a note, to produce the limpid, poetic piece which spiritualises the nostalgic call of this French brother of the Forest Bird in Siegfried. (Quoted in Nichols 1995: 6)

Ravel says about this work: ‘‘Oiseaux tristes’ is the most typical of my way of thinking. It evokes birds lost in the oppressiveness of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer’ (Nichols 1977: 42). It is thought that Ravel’s understanding of ‘typical’ was that the melancholic theme accompanied by dark harmonies reflected his own loneliness and melancholy, Stuckenschmidt calls ‘Oiseaux tristes’ ‘one of the gloomiest and most depressing [pieces] of Ravel’s youth’ (1969: 82).
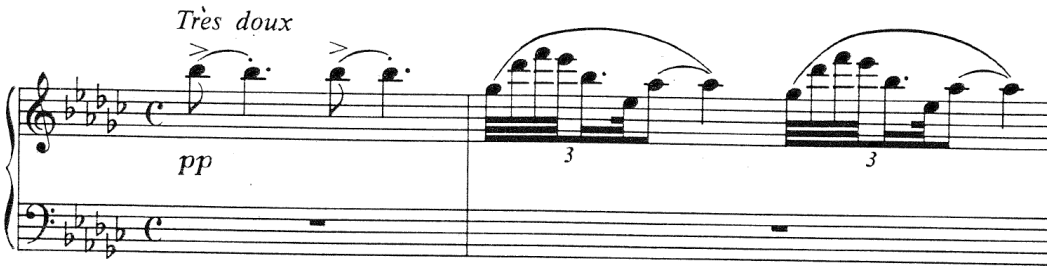
The work was not well received by Les Apaches: ‘he played it to us again and again without our being able to understand what he was after. He was rather disconcerted to find us indifferent to a piece in which he had put so much of himself’, M.D. Calvocoressi recalled (Nichols 1995: 6). Not indifferent, though, was Ravel’s life-long friend Ricardo Viñes. He wrote in his diary that on the 11 October 1904 Ravel played the ‘Oiseaux tristes’ to the group and that he was the only member who liked it (Gubisch 1980: 205). Ravel in turn dedicated the work

to Viñes stating; ‘It was fun to inscribe to a pianist a piece that was not in the least bit “pianistic”’ (Calvocoressi 1933: 660).

Through this work we see Ravel’s love of nature and his inventiveness in its observation. Nichols quotes Fauré’s remarks about its texture: ‘Fundamentally Ravel set store by the player bringing out two levels: the birdcalls with their rapid arabesques on a higher, slightly strident level and the suffocating, sombre atmosphere of the forest on a lower level which is rather heavy and veiled in pedal without much movement’ (Nichols 1995: 57).

Harmonically, ‘Oiseaux tristes’ is very eccentric and does not constantly nor easily relate to the tonal centre of E-flat minor but tends to stay characteristically in a minor key.

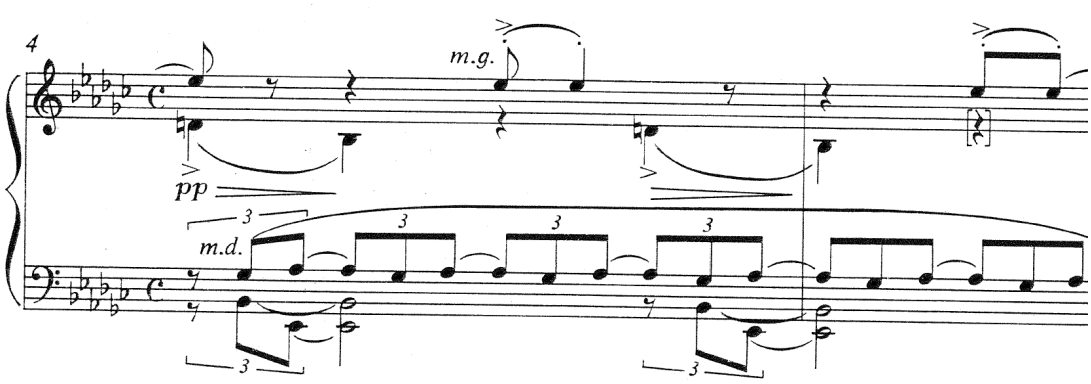
Rhythmically Ravel wanted the birdcall figure to be played faster than written (Perlemuter 1998: 24). This is confirmed by Ravel’s own piano roll performance of the work in which he also plays the birdcall theme much faster than is written (Nichols 1977: 43).



Example 6: Bars 1 - 2

In his book *Twentieth-Century Piano Music* D. Burge states that Ravel tolerated no deviations with regard to rhythmic accuracy and that his classical approach to rhythm as well as metre, tempo, and form is one of the clearest distinctions between his music and that of Debussy (1990: 46). In this particular instance, however, rhythmic precision is clearly not as important as atmosphere and programmatic description. What is crucial at the beginning of the piece is to create the sonic picture of the blackbird in its typical setting.
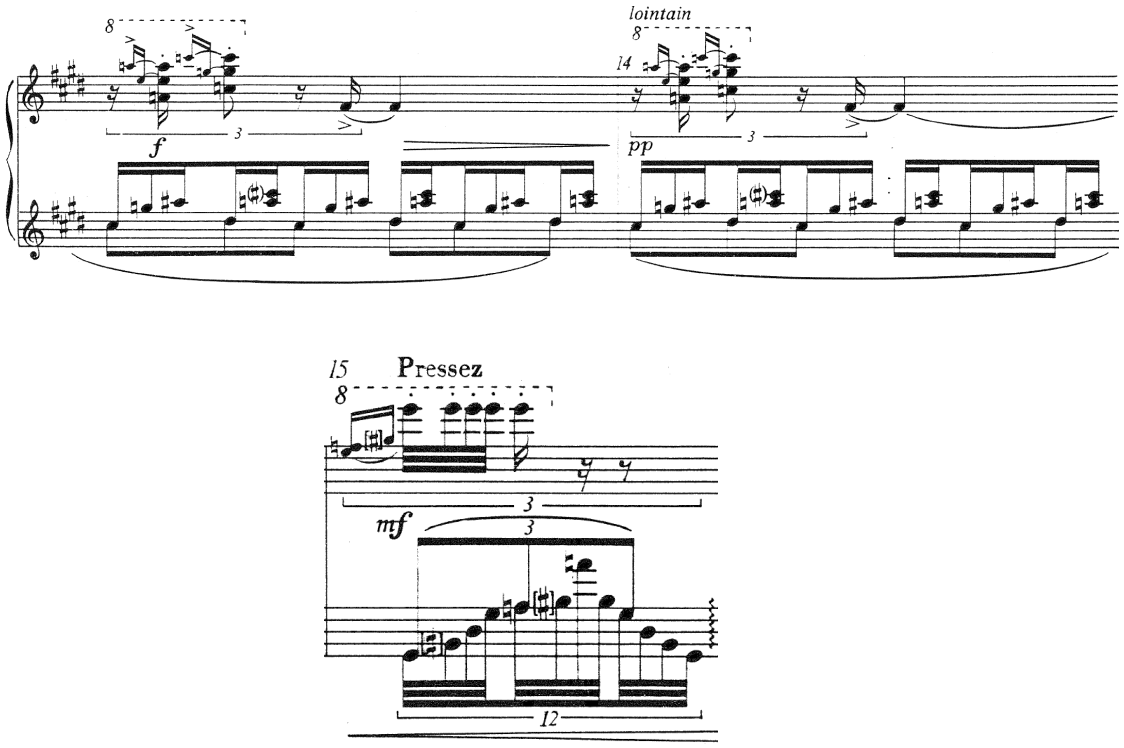
Two accented repeated notes, which signify the bird, open the work and they are followed by its call, notated in Example 6. It is a stark opening, bare and bleak. The accompaniment that begins in bar 4 represents the heavy dark forest that, in itself, is multi-layered, as there are three voices. The bass consists of open fifths (an Impressionistic feature). A middle voice creates momentum through a continuous movement of alternating seconds and above it there is a sigh-like two-note phrase that is repeated using different intervals.



Example 7: Bars 4 - 5

This complicated texture dovetails into a coherent and compact work; it is intense and convoluted and yet never feels uneconomic in its use of effects, notes or structuring devices.

The change of key at bar 10 brings innovative additions to the birdcall in the top textural level; these additions, made familiar by Liszt, include grace notes, octave doubling, echoes and quick repeated notes.



Example 8: Bars 13 - 15

Flourishes of the kind illustrated above create a forward drive and soon the accompaniment picks up on this by using semiquavers at first and then demi-semiquavers. With this forward movement there is also an increase in dynamics and the work arrives at a climax marked *forte*. Up to that climactic point the indications vary between *pianissimo*, *piano* and even *ppp* (with only one use of *forte* and one of *mezzo-forte*). The climax wanes with a slow decrescendo over three bars, with the texture thinning in each bar until only the rocking seconds remain. Bar 21 introduces the return of the two accented notes representing the blackbird, but they are a semitone lower than at the opening. The last page of the piece is a jewel; it begins with an ad-lib slow section that sounds like a study of keyboard tone colour. It is very atmospheric and delicate, providing no substance but rather floats around the keyboard evoking emotion and exciting the imagination.

The second last lines unify the work by continually using the blackbird motive. The two accented notes are harmonically shaded by chords, of which they are the sevenths, thus highlighting a typically Ravelian nuance; a pause on the second of the two motivic notes causes the momentum to wane. The last line

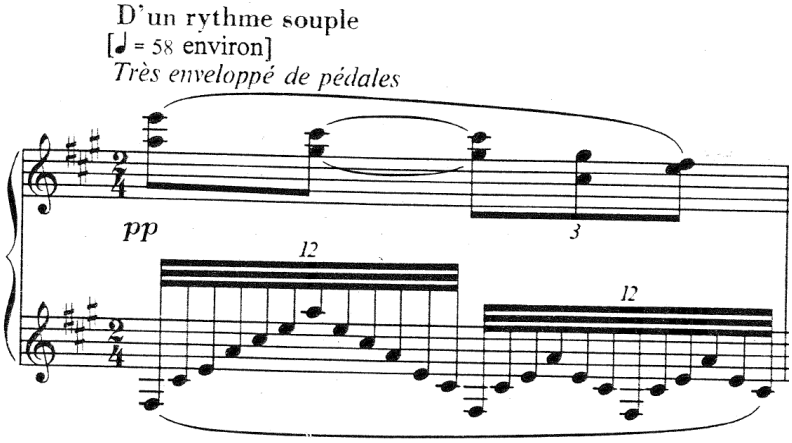
returns to the key of E-flat minor and contains more elements of the original texture from bar 4, the two repeated notes are on E-flat each time and Ravel indicates *perdendo* to a *ppp* to bring the piece to a sensitive close.

4.3. *Miroirs*: ‘Une barque sur l’océan’

The third piece of the *Miroirs* and the next in order of composition was ‘Une barque sur L’océan’ (A Boat on the Ocean). This work successfully develops the scope of *Jeux d’eau*, which describes the splashings of a fountain, into a full-scale seascape. Like ‘Noctuelles’, it also develops the idea or technique of Impressionism. It was written in March 1905 at the same time as Debussy was working on *La Mer* and a few weeks before Ravel enjoyed a yacht cruise with some friends. As Ravel was not on speaking terms with Debussy at this time his inspiration must have come from elsewhere, perhaps the harbour at St-Jean-de-Luz, a place from his youth (Nichols 1995: 6).

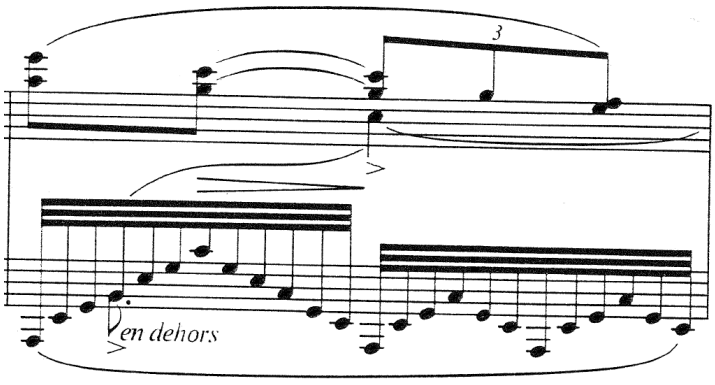
The picture created with this work is that of a boat gently rocking. The opening theme representing the boat is repeated over and over again, accompanied by gently rippling arpeggios in the left hand, which conjure up the ocean as a backdrop. Ravel’s indication *d’un rythme souple* shows his desire for the music to sound relaxed and free like the ocean itself, not rigid. He is also looking for a mass of blended sound as he encourages the use of pedal (*très envelopé de pédals*).

The work begins in 2/4 but immediately Ravel sets the melody as two quavers followed by a triplet, to create rhythmic interest over the quick left hand arpeggios. To avoid a sense of beat, though, Ravel uses a tie on the first note of the second beat, thus blurring the downbeat and creating, for the listener, the unpredictable, moveable flow of the ocean.



Example 9: Bar 1

This opening is repeated three times before a new melody is superimposed over the watery theme to create an additional layer of interest. It consists of only two accented notes, a G-sharp in the left hand and a C-sharp in the right hand. A good performer allows these notes to ring out clearly rather than let them disappear in the accompaniment. Nichols argues that, in adding this layer, Ravel has blurred the boundary between harmony and melody; the melody results from the arpeggiated figure. The melody does not develop, however, but rather serves the texture of the piece (Nichols 1977: 44). Compare Example 10: to Example 9: to see the additional layer.

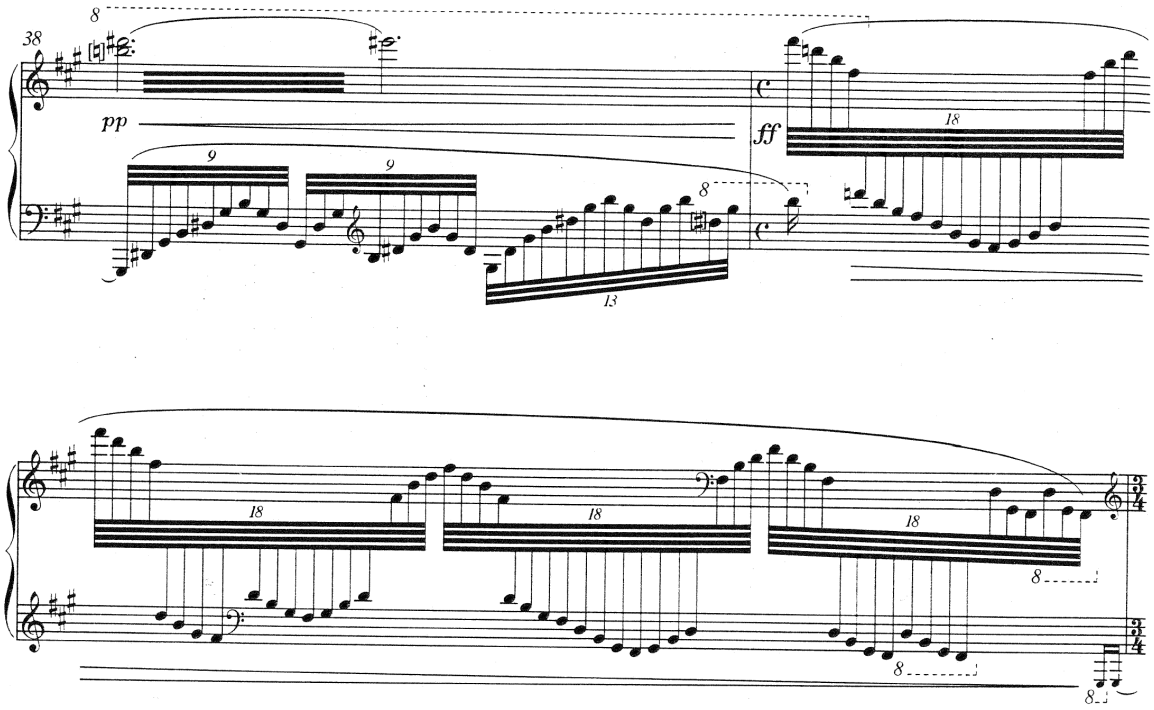


Example 10: Bar 4

Ravel then replaces the opening theme with simple two-note melodies. The first note of the phrase belongs to a seventh chord and it falls to either a major or minor second. These are two of Ravel's most commonly used intervals. He places them over a few bars of the quick arpeggiated figures in a 3/4 time-signature. This passage serves as a bridge to bar 14 where the opening returns and is repeated. On the repeat the bridge section is one tone higher than the original and ends in a bar that consists of only one beat.

The new section at bar 29 exists in three layers with the melody created again through accented notes from the descending arpeggios, which are now in the right hand. The left hand creates an intriguing harmony through the use of diminished chords in unrelated keys; this section is far from the tonic key of A major, which dominated the opening. A climactic point arises at the end of a crescendo and the subsequent decrescendo gives way to a new section entirely.

This new idea with its double note trills in a quick crescendo provides an extraordinarily programmatic effect of gushing wind. Demuth writes: 'A certain strength asserts itself as the sea shows signs of rising and the craft rides before the wind' (1947: 64). In bar 38 the trill is placed against the arpeggio, which starts *pianissimo* and rises from the bottom of the keyboard to the upper register in a quick sweep that furiously accumulates in volume. Upon arriving at the *fortissimo* an arpeggiated cascade down the piano is distributed between the hands in a decrescendo over 74 notes down to *pianissimo*.



Example 11: Bars 38 - 39

This two-bar pattern is repeated three times with the third episode reaching *fff* and using even more notes in the downward cascade, which culminates in glissando on the black keys. The black notes on the piano make up a pentatonic scale, a scale commonly used by the Impressionists because of its exotic quality. Ravel uses it here ascending and descending to lead into the next section at bar 46.

The pace slows as the work takes an expressive turn for this central section, which consists of 15 bars. Slow moving triplets and quavers used melodically interplay with the quicker moving arpeggio figures. Crescendo and decrescendo dynamic markings create the effect of repeated swells. The right hand settles into a regular accompaniment figure while the left hand creates a melodic line with intervals of a seventh occurring on regular beats. The music here is simple and leads back to the opening section (bar 61), which is now in the dominant key of E major.

There is no repeat of the opening now and no bridge section. Instead the music goes straight into the double-note trill episode, again repeated. Now these episodes are in the unrelated key of E-flat major. A repetition of the slower

expressive section brings the return of the tonic key of A major as well as some new material. This new material moves into the minor key: the right hand arpeggiates the F-sharp minor chord while the left hand sounds a distant sad melody. What began cheerfully has now turned melancholic. At one point (bars 92 –92) Ravel employs a Baroque-like walking bass.

Because of the length of this piece, Ravel has the opportunity to experiment. He continues the arpeggiated figure throughout, but combines it with new melodic ideas. The form of the work loses focus but the unity is held fast by the continual use of arpeggios. Ravel works up to the main climax at bar 104. This is followed by a very technical cadenza placing groups of eight notes against groups of six in a fluid rapid flourish, which bears the melodic accents heard throughout the piece. Familiarity is restored when Ravel employs his double trill episodes beginning at bar 111; each repetition is written an octave lower and one gets the distinct sense that after this mass of music an end is looming. Ravel includes a few bars from his slow expressive section and then sets short ascending and descending passages between the main theme of the opening, once again in the home key. The end consists of a rapid arpeggio onto a rolled A major triad which suspiciously, as in 'Noctuelles', has no tonic.

This work is the longest of the set, the most conventional in texture and the least musically complex, according to Burge (1997: 47). While it draws on aspects of *Jeux d'eau*, Ravel did manage to free himself from its constraints by creating a water piece with the impression of being free (Nichols 1977: 44). The work, though, is reminiscent of Liszt, who had often used the grandeur arpeggios that move up and down the keyboard and the multiple trills in the upper register. Demuth observes: 'of all Ravel's pieces one may say that the writing in this work is most readily created according to the Liszt tradition' (1947: 65). Nevertheless Ravel did not want it to sound like a virtuosic exercise and warned Perlemuter not to hurry the work or allow it to become hurried (Perlemuter 1998: 25).

'Une barque sur l'océan' is an Impressionistic mixing of sound and effect. Although there are themes, they are not developed but rather repeated and inverted to create a textural rather than structural effect. The pedal plays an important role too in creating the effect of great washes of colour. It was

dedicated to the painter Paul Sordes, perhaps because of the strongly visual impressions evoked.

4.4. *Miroirs*: 'Alborada del gracioso'

The fourth, most popular and most often performed of the *Miroirs* is 'Alborada del gracioso'. The work was dedicated to the writer and critic, M.D. Calvocoressi. Perhaps this dedication is also ironic as this work, which is the most pianistic, was dedicated to someone who described himself in the following words, 'I was (and have remained) a vile bungler at the piano' (quoted in Nichols 1987: 177). [11]

Stuckenschmidt explains that *alborada* literally means a song of the dawn and is a type of serenade originating from the mountain region of Galicia in Northern Spain, while *gracioso* is a character in Spanish comedy, a jester (Stuckenschmidt 1969: 83-84). Ravel wrote a letter to Ferdinand Sinzig of Steinway and Sons in New York in which he spoke about this title:[12]

> I understand your bafflement over how to translate the title 'Alborada del gracioso'. That is precisely why I decided not to translate it. The fact is that the *gracioso* of Spanish comedy is a rather special character and one which, so far as I know, is not found in any other theatrical tradition. We do have an equivalent, though, in the French theatre: Beaumarchais's *Figaro*. But he is more philosophical, less well-meaning than his Spanish ancestor. The simplest thing, I think, is to follow the title with the rough translation 'Morning Song of the Clown'. That will be enough to explain the humoristic style of this piece. (Quoted in Nichols 1995: 7)

While each of the *Miroirs* is unique, the 'Alborada' seems the most removed from the set, not least because it is the only one with a Spanish title. Firstly, it has a human presence while the others deal with nature ('Noctuelles' deals with moths, 'Oiseaux Tristes' with birds and 'Une Barque sur L'Océan' with the ocean). Secondly, it incorporates various Spanish elements drawn from several sources.

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[11] The unpianistic 'Oiseaux tristes' was dedicated to the pianist Ricardo Viñes, see pages 42 – 43.

[12] This letter is owned by Dr Arbie Orenstein.

Ravel's ancestry (his mother was a Basque and spoke excellent Spanish) gave him an affinity to the idiom and he had already flirted with Spain in his 'Habanera' (the only other piece to which Ravel gave a Spanish title) (Stuckenschmidt 1969: 83). Since Bizet composed *Carmen,* French composers have delighted in the atmospheres and musical styles of Spain (Nichols 1995: 7) for example Chabrier's *España*, Debussy's *Lindaraja* for two pianos[13] and *La soirée dans grenade,* (Howat in Mawer 2000: 74) and Edouard Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* (this Lalo was father of the the anti-Ravel music critic, Pierre Lalo) (Kennedy 1996: 717).
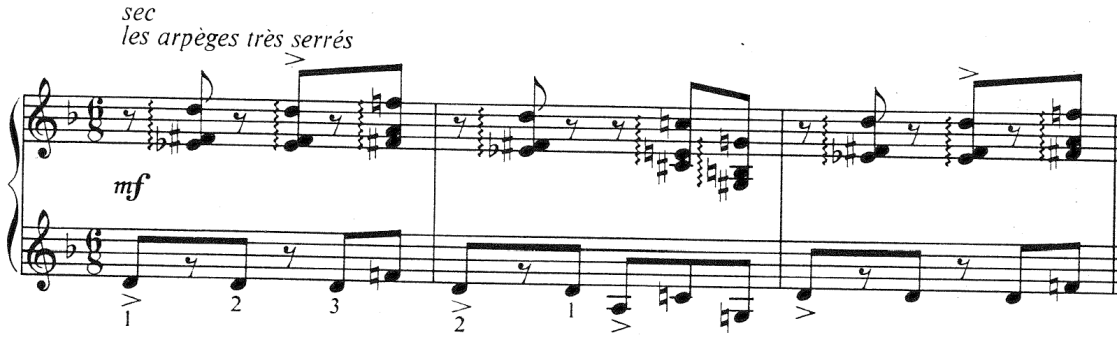
James points out Ravel's use of the technique of the Italian composer Domenico Scarlatti (James 1987: 45). Ravel's quasi-Scarlatti idiom results in a vigorous Spanish dance articulated in guitar-like figurations amongst expressive and humorous melodies; at the same time he creates brilliant piano music with the virtuosic flair of Liszt. The excitement is generated through the use of staccato, repeated notes and single and double-note glissandi. There is a certain dryness in the piano idiom which helps to create the idea of a strummed guitar. Scarlatti immigrated to Spain in the early 18th century where he wrote hundreds of keyboard sonatas (*essercisi)* for Maria Barbara, the Queen of Spain. In these sonatas Scarlatti developed new technical devices that included rapid repetitions, double note passages, crossing hands, rolls, ornamental trills and rapid scale-like passages. He was one of the fathers of keyboard technique as it has evolved over three centuries (Kennedy 1996: 640). The most characteristic element of Scarlatti's technique, however, is the Spanish style in which he casts it. His aim often seems to have been to create guitar effects on the keyboard; the rhythmic drive, lush ornamentation and improvisatory sense of his little sonatas are typical of Spanish music.

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[13] *Lindaraja* was composed in 1901 and is based on Ravel's 'Habanera' written in 1895, the score of which Debussy borrowed and only returned several years later after having lost the music. He discovered it behind his piano when he moved house (Larner 1996: 54).
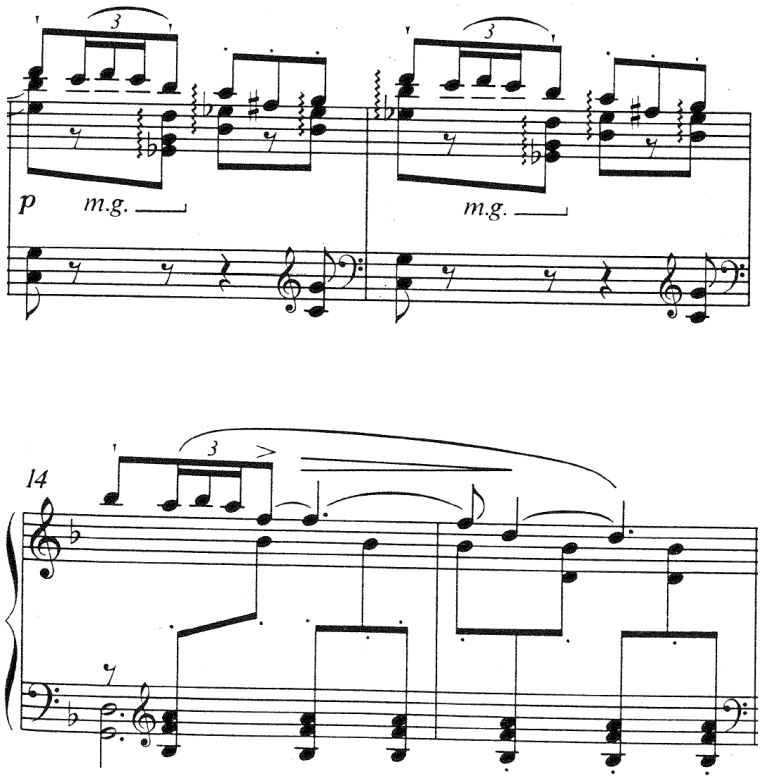
Ravel's harmony is modernised with clashing semitones and sometimes even three chromatic tones beginning to form clusters (Stuckenschmidt 1969: 84). Stuckenschmidt suggests that 'Alborada' is 'the copy book example of the picture of modern music', in its juxtaposition of collage-like unrelated musical ideas into a single entity (1969: 84). The form of the piece is roughly ternary, an exposition consisting of two themes, the middle section and then the recapitulation, which now only contains the second theme. The outer sections in the Phrygian modality are in the style of a *seguidilla* making the work Andalusian rather than Castilian (Nichols 1995: 7).

The work is undeniably Spanish from the first bar. Accents on the two main beats of the 6/8 time-signature alternate between the hands switching the attention between the melodic left and the rolled chordal accompaniment of the right. Ravel explained to Perlemuter that these chords must be 'very taut like plucked notes on a guitar' (1998: 28). Ravel's indication of *sec, les arpèges très serrés* continues to provide the clear notion of the dry plucked sound of the guitar.



Example 12: Bars 1 - 3

After 11 bars of this introduction a decrescendo signals the entrance of the first theme (the exposition is divided into two themes). This first theme uses a common Spanish melodic motive using upper and lower auxiliary notes: the result, a swirling Spanish melody made up of quick legato triplets surrounded by staccato quavers. The third execution of this melodic motive ends the phrase on a long accented note, which falls by a third.



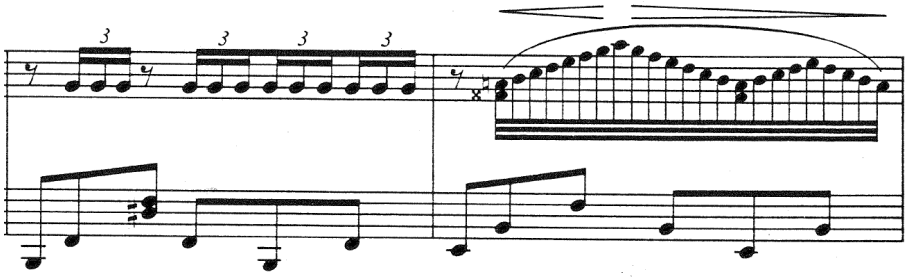
Example 13: Bars 12 - 15

This 4-bar phrase is repeated first an octave lower and then two octaves lower exploring different registers of the piano. This is followed by material from the introduction recreating the strong ambiance of the guitar and concluding with a decrescendo on alternate staccato Bs, an octave apart, alternating between the hands.

Suddenly in bar 29 a loud gesture, a fortissimo sweeping arpeggio with both hands, signals the beginning of the second theme. While Ravel continues to use unchanged melodic and rhythmic ideas (the rhythm is only slightly modified) he creates interest through a wide range of dynamic shading; subito *pianos* arrive at *fortissimo* markings and there is a crescendo in almost every bar. Accents on strong and weak beats shift the emphasis of the pulse, also adding interest but most importantly expressing the strong rhythmic nature of Spanish music.

At bar 43 interesting new material enters by way of a flamenco sub-episode (Howat in Mawer 1996: 94). Flamenco is a highly rhythmic Spanish dance style from Andalusia, also characterised by its flamboyant yet improvisatory nature

(Kennedy 1996: 256). This technically daunting section consists of gestures that provide more than mere decoration, ornamentation and embellishments. The left hand outlines a rhythmical bass of quavers while the right hand plays rapid repeated notes and quick improvisatory scale-like passages.
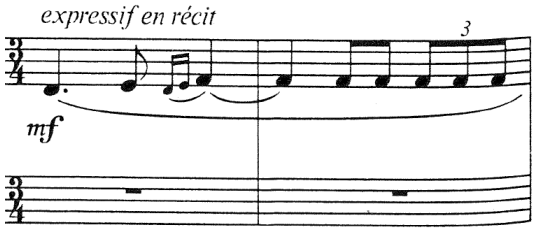


Example 14: Bars 45 - 46

The exposition comes to a close with a few sequences of the melodic themes followed by material from the introduction; the rolled chords create great excitement, and lead to a cadential D major tonic triad in bar 70.

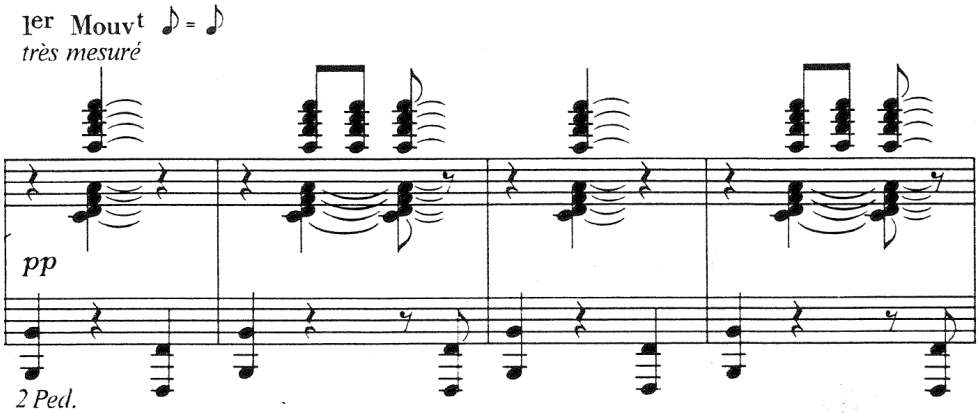
The middle section is a copla[14] where the *gracioso* sings his serenade - a slightly humorous yet melancholy song with irregular bar lengths creating an improvisatory air. The result is recitative-like and the wide spacing of the chords and harmonies create a sense of openness (Nichols 1977: 45). Ravel uses two ideas interchangeably: the first is an unaccompanied melody, again quasi-improvisatory and free of meter, perhaps because of the use of different divisions of the beat. One bar has a repeated F-sharp as a minim (two tied crotchets), then two quavers and then a triplet (see Example 15, second bar). Grace notes and appoggiaturas add to the improvised feeling and the simplicity of the melody allows it to be humorous, melancholic, evasive and haunting all at the same time.

[14] A copla is a Spanish poem set as a song (Kennedy 1996: 160).



Example 15: Bars 71 - 72

A second thematic idea is based on Ravel's signature seventh chords. The left hand provides a harmonic framework and then joins the right on the chords that are left to linger under the pedal. In these sections Ravel varies between major and minor tonalities creating an ambivalent mood described by Nichols as 'mock-melancholy' (Nichols 1977: 45).



Example 16: Bars 75 - 78

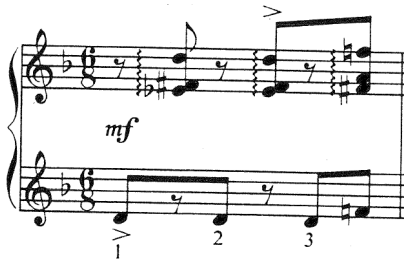
These two ideas are juxtaposed no fewer than eight times; the mood in this middle section is calm and Ravel uses an occasional left hand staccato theme (bars 120-123, 141-144, 151-154, etc) to create forward drive. The accentuation of beats 2 and 6 of the bar generates an invigorating rhythm reminiscent of the exposition. Ravel goes further in this reminder of what came before by using the melodic theme of the opening in a descending sequence at bar 126 and again at bar 157, as well as by using the flamenco repeated notes at bar 139. But the repeated staccato notes on A, an octave apart, signal the recapitulation and we arrive firmly in the return of the second theme (equivalent to bar 33 of the exposition where the repeated staccato notes were on a B) (Nichols 1977: 45). This time the flamenco section is further embellished with double note glissandi,

which, Stuckenschmidt suggests, particularly suited Ravel's technique, given his short squarish thumbs (1969: 84). The last two pages form what Nichols indentifies as 'one of the most exciting codas in all French piano music'. He goes on to describe how ideas fall over one another with subito pianissimos and fortissimos following each other bar by bar and leading toward a final dramatic climax (1977: 45).
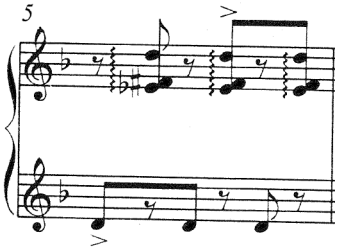
Burnett James claims that Ravel conceptualised a structure for 'Alborada' that is as strict as a fugue (1987: 46). Roy Howat has devoted a chapter to 'Motivic and Geometric Extension' in his study *Ravel and the Piano*; he points out how the composer has used rhythmic motives to enhance the structure of the piece. The structure has already been explained as a type of ternary form: introduction, exposition (consisting of theme 1 and theme 2), middle section, recapitulation (consisting of theme 2) and coda.

Here are Howat's findings on the rhythmic motives defining those sections:

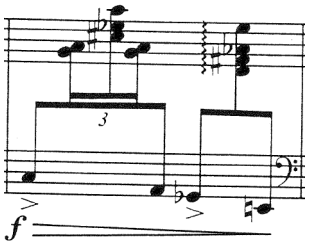
The rhythm of bar one is repeated at bar 5 to serve as an antecedent to the secondary rhythmic motive at bar 6.



Bar 1



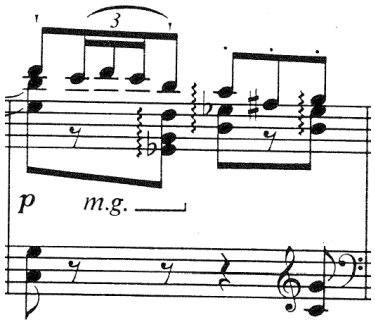
Bar 5



Bar 6
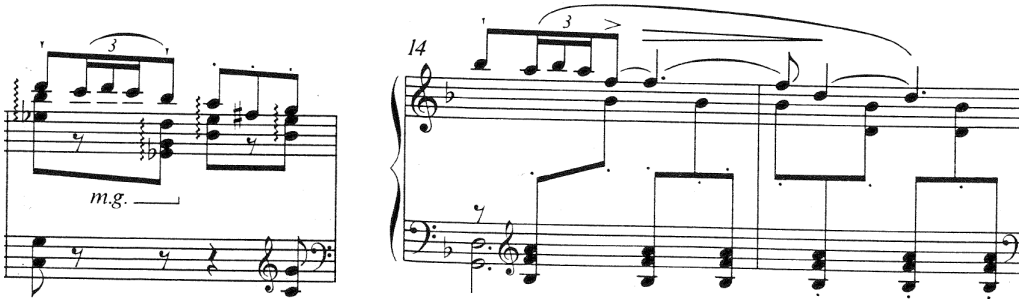
Example 17: Bar 1, Bar 5, Bar 6,

The new rhythmical motive at bar 6 is the one used in the melodic theme at the beginning of section A at bar 12.



Example 18: Bar 12
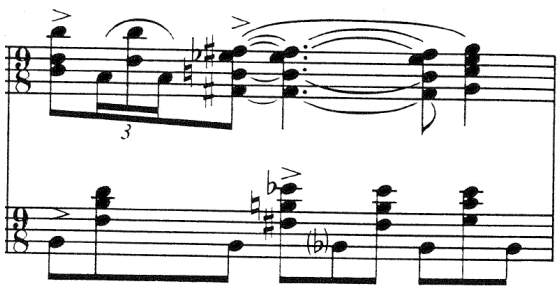
It is used again at bar 13, now as the antecedent to the new rhythmic motive at bars 14-15, as is demonstrated in Example 19.



Bar 13 *Bars 14-15*

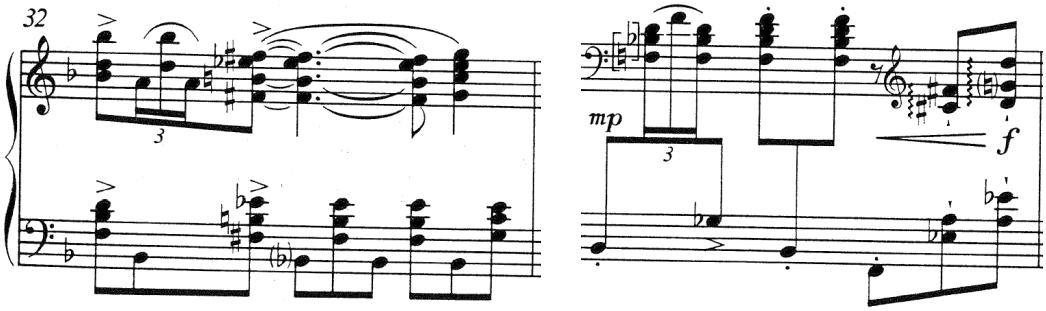
Example 19: Bars 13 - 15

The motive quoted in Example 19 signals the change to the second theme at bar 31. It now fits into one bar due to the change in time-signature from 6/8 to 9/8.



Example 20: Bar 31

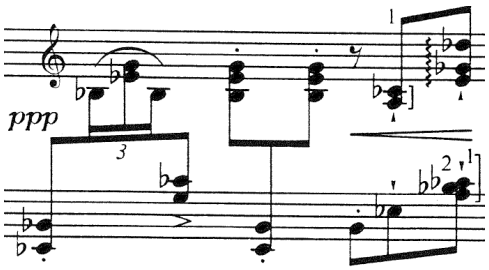
This rhythm is repeated again at bar 32 as an antecedent to the new motive at bar 33.



Bar 32 *Bar 33*

Example 21: Bars 32 - 33

This same motive heralds the recapitulation at bar 166.



Example 22: Bar 166

(Howat in Mawer 2000: 93-95)

4.5. *Miroirs*: 'La vallée des cloches'

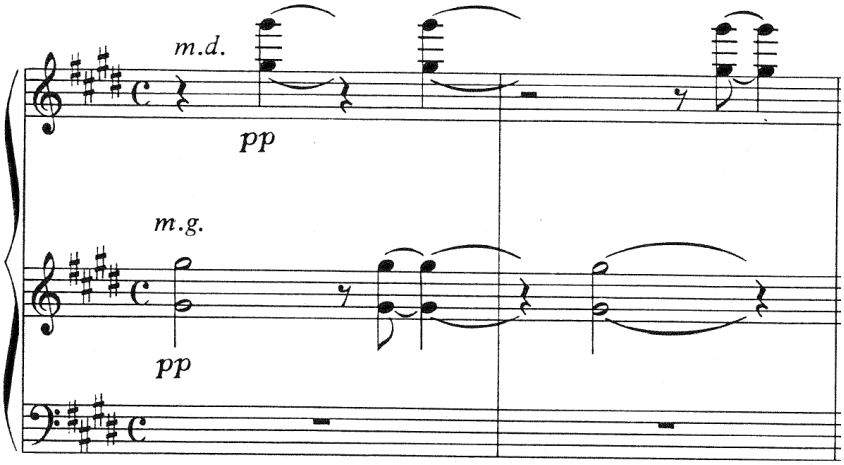
The final piece in the set is 'The Valley of the Bells' and was, according to Robert Casadesus, inspired by the sound of the bells in Paris at midday (Nichols 1995: 7). Ravel had used bell sounds before in 'Entre cloches' one of two pieces for two pianos entitled *Sites auriculaires* written in 1897 and Nichols notes that the title and substance foreshadow 'La vallée des cloches' (Nichols 1977:10). Debussy's first attempt at imitating bells was in 'Cloches à travers les feuilles' from *Images* written in 1907 and he used them again three years later in the prelude 'La Cathédral Engloutie' (Schmitz 1950:99 and 155). The effect of bells could possibly be inspired by Liszt's 'La Campanella', which also uses octaves in high registers to create bell sounds.

This last cameo of the *Miroirs* is highly programmatic, existing as 'a tone painting in three sound-colours' (Stuckenschmidt 1969: 85). Burge has noted the role that suspension harmony and melody play in creating the required bell sound (1990: 48). It is of course also the result of different pianistic timbres, and this requires imagination from the performer. Nichols explains the challenges facing pianists by describing how 'carefully gauged sonorities are required to reflect the pure bell sounds' (Nichols 1977: 47).

Although Ravel often used complex textures consisting of multi-layered ideas, 'La vallée des cloches' is the only piece in the set written over three staves. This makes it easy to grasp and understand the three levels employed to create the bell-like effect. The performer is able to discern each layer and its particular material, and as a result, the shifting of motives from one level to another is conspicuous. The texture here is not as complex as in 'Noctuelles', for example, and the three-stave writing makes it visually even clearer, suggesting visual and aural simplicity, and a sense of peace. Later Debussy used this way of writing on three staves in the second book of *Images* (1907) and in his two books of *Préludes* (1910 and 1913) (Schmitz 1950: 100 and 129).

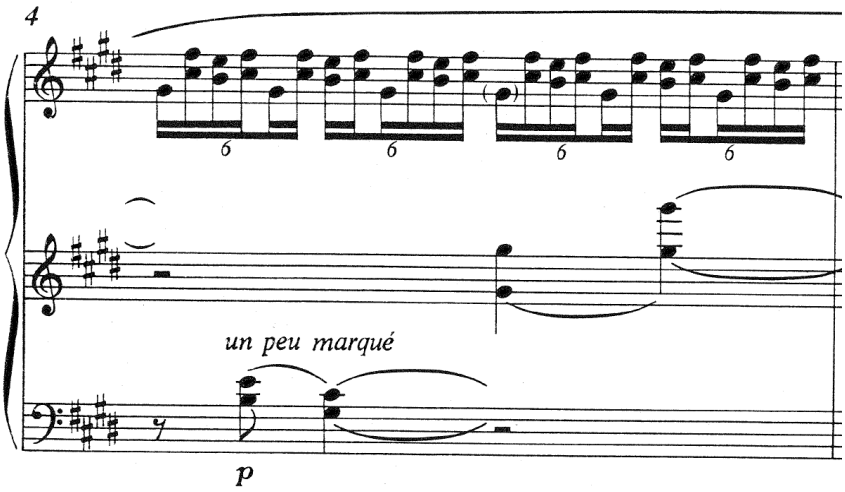
'La vallée des cloches' opens with a pianissimo G-sharp octave in the middle voice which alternates with another G-sharp octave in the upper register. Ravel has written the opening in such a way that the time between these octaves

varies; the octaves alternate and they are separated firstly by one beat, then one and a half beats, then half a beat, then two beats and then one and a half beats. This allows the work to replicate authentic bells, which do not ring within a fixed metric pulse, and allows the work a sense of space and freedom.



Example 23: Bars 1 - 2

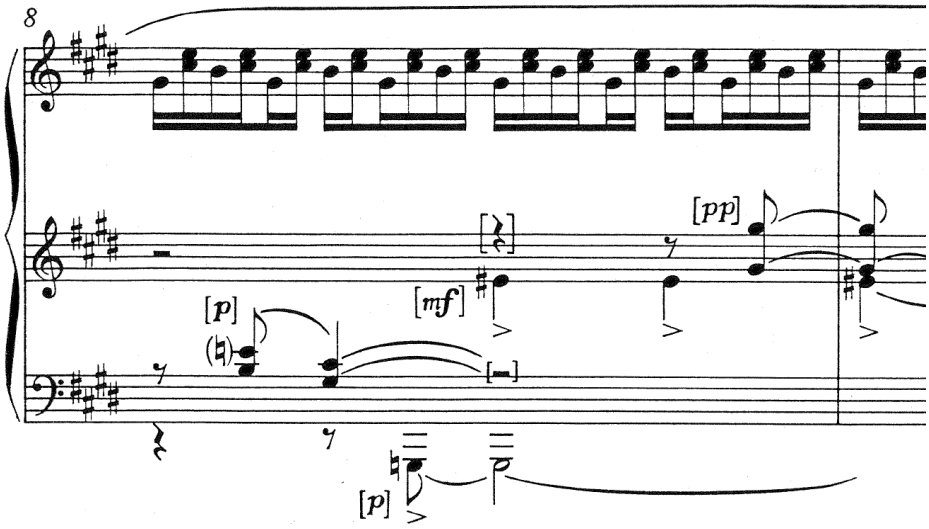
In the third bar the top voice becomes a subtle moving accompaniment made up of parallel fourths while the middle voice takes over the opening with both registers of G-sharp octaves. By bar 4 all levels are present when the lower voice introduces the melodic motive; a two-note phrase consisting of falling parallel fourths.



Example 24: Bar 4

The interval of a fourth is used persistently in this work and was used extensively in 'Noctuelles'. This creates an intervallic link between the opening and closing pieces in *Miroirs.* Howat goes so far as to say that the 'ubiquitous falling fourths link all five *Miroirs*' (Howat in Mawer 2000: 78).

An additional dimension is added to the existing layers via the presence of long notes and accented notes in various levels. These serve neither the melodic structure nor the harmonic basis and are included for their timbral and tone-colour effect. They can be seen here in the middle and lower parts.

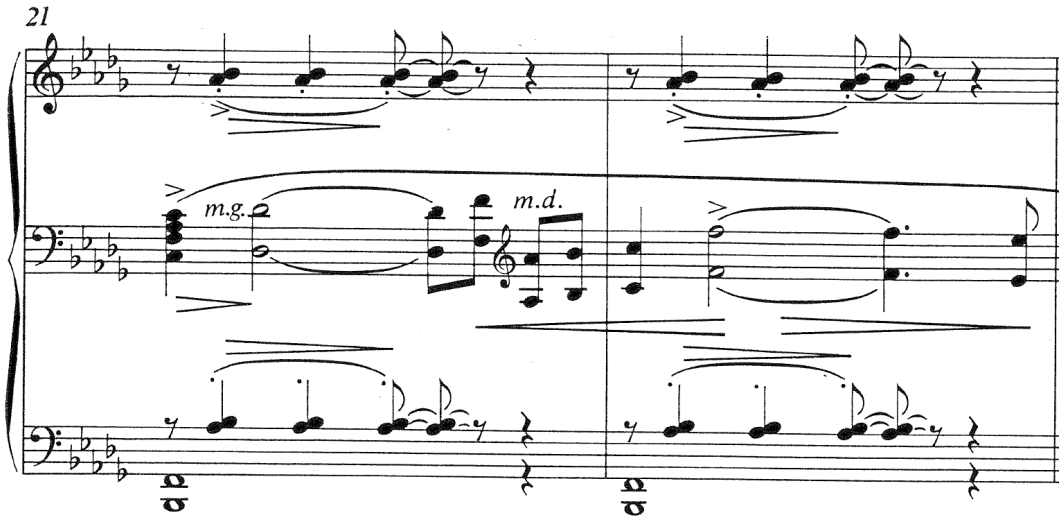


Example 25: Bar 8

Because this work is atmospheric in nature Ravel needs only to use phrase fragments to create the desired effect. Looking at the score, which continues much the same as in Examples 24 and 25, one can see that these fragments are made up often of only two notes while the moving accompaniment in the top part provides a timbral resonance rather than a harmonic basis. Hence Burge's earlier observation that the melodic and harmonic activity is suspended so as to create the sound and programmatic effect.

After the running top-part comes to an end in bar 10, Ravel uses both middle and upper parts in the melodic motive of the falling fourth. This section of eight bars, marked *très calme,* deploys these motives in varying time-signatures from 4/4 to 6/4 to 3/4 to 5/4 and back to 4/4.

The change of key at bar 20 begins the middle section which contains a 'rich Romantic tune' that is arguably one of the most beautiful melodies to be found in Ravel's music (Nichols 1977: 45), although in James' opinion it is 'a typical piece of Ravel melody' (James 1987: 45). Ravel indicates *largement chanté* to emphasise the importance of its singing character. It is a simple melody, slow with long lingering octaves moving mostly stepwise and rarely using any intervallic leap greater than a fourth. There are regular crescendo and decrescendo indications to guide the performer's creation of nuance but there is no indication that this melody should ever go beyond a *mezzo-forte*. The levels that do not contain the melody (generally the outer levels) provide mere accompaniment. The lower level consists of either open fifths or octaves; it also repeats the accompaniment of the remaining voice an octave lower. This secondary accompaniment is made up of seconds (quite typical of Ravel – an inverted seventh). The seconds are placed on the off beats of the 5/8 time-signature.



Example 26: Bars 21 - 22

When the melody moves to the top voice, the middle layer begins an accompaniment made up of triplets with the first note of each group being a rest. This provides rhythmic interest as a two-against-three rhythm is created against the melody and a slightly disturbed rocking motion is formed.

The return to the opening key (bar 42) signifies the return of the opening section but the 8 bar motivic section found at bar 12 is used first. It is marked *pianissimo* and *ppp* as well as *très calme*; Ravel makes no mistake in explaining the required atmosphere. By bar 48 the original material returns with the top level repeating the moving accompaniment in fourths while the middle voice contains both the alternating octaves as well as the parallel fourth motive that originally belonged to the lowest part. That leaves the bass level free for the rolled seventh chords. These rolled chords continue twice after all other parts have ceased, bringing this piece as well as the *Miroirs* to a close.

Conclusion

This research report has located Ravel within various contexts so as to find an appropriate frame for the five pieces that make up the *Miroirs*. Despite their remarkableness, they have never become as prominent as most of the piano works of his contemporary, Claude Debussy. Debussy remains *the* Impressionist composer in the history of music appreciation. The term Impressionism was first used in connection with Debussy's music in 1887 in the report of the secretary of the Académie des Beaux Arts: 'It is very much to be hoped that he will be on his guard against that vague 'Impressionism' which is one of the most dangerous enemies of truth in any work of art' (quoted in Jarocinski 1970: 11).[15] Robert Schmitz, however, has concluded that Debussy represents the midpoint between Romanticism and Neo-classicism (Schmitz 1950: 14). Perhaps, then, Ravel should be seen as representing the midpoint between classicism and Neo-classicism? Ravel had a strong dislike of Romanticism; when the amateur pianist Jacques-Emile Blanche asked to play piano duets with him, he agreed on condition that they exclude Beethoven, Wagner, Schumann and any other Romantics from their repertoire (Nichols 1987: 16). Nevertheless, Ravel certainly absorbed the technical and sound innovations of some of the nineteenth-century Romantics, most especially Liszt.

Ravel's claim, that he, rather than Debussy, was the creator of the new piano style used extensively in *Miroirs*, has been discussed at length in the preceding pages. He argued that the new style had been founded in his *Jeux d'eau* in 1901, and that Debussy had written nothing new for the piano by that time. Debussy's piano oeuvre prior to 1901 contains the two *Arabesques* (1888-1891), *Nocturne* (1890), *Suite Bergamasque* (1890), *Rêverie* (1980), *Danse* (1890), *Valse Romantique* (1890), *Ballade* (1890), *Mazurka*(1890) and *Pour le Piano* (1896-1901) (Schmitz 1950: 43-70). While some of these works have become very popular most are not often played and not considered important in the composers

[15] Report in Les arts français, no 16, 1918, p. 92.

overall output. When one looks at them they tend to be Romantic both in character and in tonal usage. There are certain features that foreshadow the elements that have become the characteristics of Impressionism, such as the inclusion of sevenths and the use of modal passages, but they certainly do not dramatically change any of the conventions of the Romantic aesthetic.

Thus, when Ravel wrote *Jeux d'eau* in 1901, he was truly exploring the musical language. Hélène Jourdan-Morhange comments that this composition 'opens up new horizons in piano technique' and she adds that it is noticeable that Debussy's first attempt at a new type of piano writing began only with his 'Jardins sous la pluie', written in 1903. She also quotes one of the Apaches' (Fargue) reactions to the first hearing of *Jeux d'eau*: 'There was a strange fire, a whole panoply of subtleties and vibrations which none of us could previously have imagined' (Perlemuter 1970: 5). Given the passion of the Apaches for contemporary culture, including music, surely they would have been well aware of the current music trends? They admired the music of Debussy and for Fargue to write so enthusiastically of *Jeux d'eau*'s novelty seems to support Ravel's claim for priority in the establishing of a new piano aesthetic.

Once Ravel had completed *Jeux d'eau* he wanted to free himself from it. It was hugely successful. He often told the story of how, when he was once in Vienna, he had stopped in a leather shop to buy a wallet. As he came to pay, he gave the sales attendant his name upon which the girl asked him if he was the composer of *Jeux d'eau*, which she loved to play. When he responded that he was that very man she exclaimed: 'then Maître, allow me to offer you this wallet with my thanks and in token of my profound admiration', Ravel concluded this anecdote by remarking: 'Vienna is the only city where a salesgirl would play *Jeux d'eau* and make you such a gracious gesture' (Fargue 1949: 32).

Ravel composed the *Sonatine* after *Jeux d'eau*. The first movement was written for a composition competition which was subsequently cancelled so Ravel followed it with two further movements (Nichols 1977: 40). Although it dates from the same year as the *Miroirs* it was written before them. The *Sonatine* is not as novel as the *Miroirs* and was written in the composer's earlier style. The Classical form does not restrain his rich harmonies derived from interesting chords as well

as fervent and strongly contoured melodies. Although Ravel was often somewhat dismissive of his early piano compositions he enjoyed playing this work himself and did so on his tour to America. Hélène Jourdan-Morhange commented: 'Ravel is in his element in this youthful work' (Perlemuter 1970: 11).

Then came the epoch-making *Miroirs*. These are indeed works of incredible craftsmanship as well as exquisite beauty. It is crucial to place them in their milieu so as to shed light on their various attributes. As with many modern works their magnificence is made more accessible through comprehension and appreciation of their compositional details. By reconstructing the cultural and social contexts in which the music was written, it is possible to make a more personal identification with it. Obviously analysis helps enormously in this endeavour. The pieces that make up *Miroirs* were critical in Ravel's development and led him on to other great and complex creations such as *Gaspard de la Nuit* and the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*.

The relentlessly virtuosic *Gaspard de la Nuit*, consisting of 'Ondine', 'Le Gibet' and 'Scarbo' was written in 1908 and based on the prose poems of Aloysius Bertrand. There are aspects in this work that can clearly be traced as developments from both *Jeux d'eau* and from the *Miroirs.* The virtuosity is paramount and Ravel acknowledged that he was attempting to write music that was more difficult even than Balakirev's *Islamey*. In fact, not only did he achieve this, but history has judged it a better work (Nichols 1977:63). The technical demands of 'Scarbo' are thus described by Jankélévitch:

> … while the Transcendental Studies [of Liszt] deal usually with one kind of difficulty in each piece (arpeggios, octaves, scales) … 'Scarbo' is like a fiendish encyclopaedia of all the traps, obstacles and snares that an inexhaustible imagination can devise for a pianist's fingers: repeated notes, trills, alternating chords, headlong leaps, passages of wrist staccato… The hand can never settle down. (Jankélévitch 1956: 87)

Also included in his piano oeuvre are *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn, À la manière de Borodin, À la manière de Chabrier* and *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Meanwhile Debussy also took up the Impressionistic aesthetic, firstly in *Estampes* (1903) and then with his two books of *Images* (1905 and 1907), which are highly

Impressionistic and abstract. The 24 préludes, also in two books (1910 and 1913), are wonderful impressions of various subjects such as nature, water and light. Schmitz comments,

> In the fashioning of these perfect miniatures Debussy has paid the highest compliment to the performers and the public, for he has entrusted to their care his intimate thoughts, his reactions and impressions to a multitude of varied and delightful subjects, sharing many moods, bringing not only the realism of his sharp etching of his subject matter, but also his personal comments – and with the additional compliment of a compactness, a concentration of material, an absence of repetition. (Schmitz 1950: 129-130)

Debussy's other piano works include the exquisite *L'Isle joyeuse*, the *Children's Corner Suite* and two books of *Études*. Together Ravel and Debussy have created an extraordinary legacy in early twentieth-century pianism.

Ravel is indeed an important contributor to the twentieth century and should be given credit for his development of piano music. Calvocoressi describes his friend:

> He was from the outset, quite sure of himself, of his purpose, and of his technique. The one thing he cared to say about his music was that he knew exactly what he wanted to do, and why. One day he said to me: 'I may confidently aver that I never release a work until I am certain that I have done my utmost and could not in any way improve one single detail in it'. (Nichols 1987: 184)

Ravel himself, in his usual understated style admitted his total passion for music: 'It's lucky I've managed to write music, because I know perfectly well I should never have been able to do anything else' (Roland-Manuel 1957: 136). In his sixty-two years Ravel fashioned a rare gem in his oeuvre for the piano; two and a half hours of diverse music carefully and painstakingly put together. If his frail body had not given up in 1937 one can only imagine what other piano gems might have emerged from his pen … 'I still have so much music in my head … I haven't said anything yet, and I still have so much to say!' Maurice Ravel (Larner 1996: 218).

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